Andrea Leadsom: Does my hon. Friend accept that if we are going to make the case for "not only but also", as he described it, the case for HS2 needs be made after the "not only"? In other words, if we are trying to make an economic argument, we have to add on the incremental improvements to be made and then justify HS2 expense on top of that.

Stephen Hammond: There is one fallacy with my hon. Friend's argument. Simply speeding up the current network and alleviating some minor problems is no substitution for high-speed rail. It is clear that high-speed rail would at least double capacity, and on certain parts of the route, the capacity increase would be significantly more than that.

The Y-shaped high-speed network across the UK would bring a benefit-cost ratio of about 2:6. For the London to Birmingham section, the ratio would be 2:0. That shows that the case for going further north becomes more compelling and adds to the economic benefit. The proposals in "A Better Railway for Britain" would have a benefit-cost ratio of 1:4. Those ratios prove that high-speed rail is significantly better than some of these hotch-potch alternatives in "A Better Railway for Britain".

Dan Byles (North Warwickshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that between the two iterations of the business case in March 2010 and February 2011, the Government had to slash their estimate of the benefit-cost ratio by 40%? That was the first time that the business case was prodded. If another 40% comes off it when it is prodded again, it will be proven to have been economically unviable.

Stephen Hammond: When the business case is re-examined, the key thing will be: what happens if it improves? The more important point is that the benefit-cost ratio for HS2 is overwhelmingly ahead of any of the other proposals. That is true.

The economic case is overwhelming. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Esther McVey) eloquently set out some of the issues in the north, but the point is that in the construction phase alone, high-speed rail will generate 40,000 jobs along the route. That does not include any calculation of the ripple supply-chain effect, which will certainly be felt. More than that, the combination of HS2 and the northern hub, which has already been referred to, will create a new economic conurbation in the north and allow much quicker access between the north and London. That connectivity is hugely important.

When the business community criticises politicians, it says that all too often one of the reasons why it does not invest and why there are barriers to growth is that we, the politicians, have not put in place the appropriate infrastructure. This scheme is the appropriate infrastructure for the 21st century.

The environmental impact cannot be understated. The Department for Transport currently estimates that the project is carbon-neutral, and I absolutely accept that. However, I am aware that the Campaign for Better Transport is doing some new research into the impact of taking extra freight by rail, which, when combined with the transference effect from railways, I am led to believe points to the conclusion that the carbon footprint will be significantly reduced.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Hammond: No, I am sorry; I have only a minute and a half left.

There is a myth that local services will suffer as a result of High Speed 2. That is not true: local services are already at capacity. We need to do other things, but high-speed rail is not part of that argument. That is a diversionary tactic. There is also a myth, which has been brought up time after time today, that there is a £30 billion cost. Yes, of course the scheme will cost £30 billion, but Crossrail is currently costing us £2 billion a year. Crossrail will have a huge impact on London and create huge benefits for the commuting area of London and the south-east. If we look at the cost of Crossrail against the annual cost of High Speed 2, we see that they are actually a substitution for one another. It is quite clear that we can invest the £2 billion a year in rail infrastructure that the Government have costed for without affecting other investment.

The case is a good one and there are overwhelming reasons for it. The network is at capacity, the economy will benefit, the scheme will be at least carbon-neutral and, given that it does not start until after 2017, High Speed 2 is affordable.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. In view of the level of interest in this debate, I must inform the House that after the next speech the time limit for Back-Bench speeches will be reduced to four minutes in order to accommodate as many contributing colleagues as possible.

4.47 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I am grateful to have an opportunity to speak in this debate and congratulate the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on introducing it. We have had debates on the subject before in Westminster Hall, and I shall have to make some of the points that I made in those debates again, because they are significant.

I am a passionate believer in railways and have been for decades. Even when railways were unfashionable, I believed that they were the transport mode of the future, and so they have proved to be. Indeed, there is absolutely no doubt that we will have more railways in future. I believe that we should invest heavily in railways and in additional routes, but I remain a sceptic about HS2. I applaud in particular the speeches by the hon. Member for Banbury (Tony Baldry)—who has just left the Chamber—and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff), who made many important points that I will not necessarily repeat.

The scheme is expensive, but if it was worth while I would support that expense. It also has an opportunity cost: we should be doing things now, not in decades to come. As the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said, even getting on a train to Milton Keynes is a problem now, let alone finding a seat, and the same is true elsewhere. We need heavy investment in all sorts of railway schemes, but not necessarily this one, which will come a long time in the future, not now. However, it will not be necessary even in the future. The point has been

[Kelvin Hopkins]

made about Britain being a densely populated country, and many towns that need to be served by high-speed trains would not be. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) is quite right that he would not benefit at all from HS2. Indeed, getting to and from the station is a much more significant problem for those living even on the outskirts of Birmingham than getting from Birmingham to London.

We need more capacity, but for that we need to upgrade existing routes. For example, there is no question but that the east coast main line needs to be upgraded; indeed, I had a long talk about that with the chief executive at our recent conference. However, all we need is an additional viaduct to quadruple the track at Welwyn, a passing loop at Peterborough and a crossover at Newark, and then we will have no problem at all with 140 mph trains running from London to Edinburgh. To build a high-speed line carrying no more than two or three trains a day that far would be nonsense. We have the capacity now, provided we upgrade the route a little.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I completely concur with the hon. Gentleman. The same train line goes through our constituencies. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) that we should be looking at many other areas in which to invest. We could move many more passengers around the country. The hon. Gentleman is making a perfect argument for looking at this matter again.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her support. We have neighbouring constituencies and share the rail route that runs through our towns.

In the end, the problem comes down to the west coast main line, which needs the signalling to be upgraded to the most modern standard, more train paths, and to get the freight off the line. Freight and passengers do not mix. Freight trains move more slowly, and they damage the track more than the lighter passenger trains, so we need to invest in a dedicated freight line running up the backbone of Britain, from the channel tunnel to Glasgow, linking all the major conurbations. I have supported that scheme for a long time, and it would take 5 million lorries a year off the roads, as well as removing all the freight traffic from the east and west coast main lines. The passenger routes need to be separated from the freight routes and upgraded to improve capacity. I believe that that is what we need, and that is why I am sceptical about the HS2 scheme.

That freight route could be built in four years for as little as £6 billion, and it would cause no environmental difficulty because it could use existing under-utilised routes and old track bed could be brought back into use. That, and a couple of tunnels, would make the whole thing work. I have made this case time and again in the Chamber over the past 14 years, and I have mentioned it to the Minister of State. I have presented a paper on it to the Transport Select Committee. I also know engineers who have worked on the scheme and worked the details out. It just needs to be done. Fifteen of us had a meeting with the Secretary of State for Transport in the previous Government to put our case for the scheme, but the Department was so hostile because a small section of our proposed route overlapped the route it wanted to use for HS2. Even if HS2 is built, the lines could be paralleled at that point. There would not be a problem.

We need a freight route that is capable of taking full-scale lorry trailers on trains. That could never be done on existing routes without incurring the prohibitive cost of raising all the tunnels and bridges throughout the network. We need a track that has the capacity to take double-stack containers. Most of our existing routes cannot even take standard 9 feet 6 inch containers. We also need a track that has the capacity to take continental trains, which currently cannot get through our platforms because they are too wide, the gauge is too big. We need to be able to accommodate trains travelling from, say, Rome to Birmingham carrying San Pellegrino water.

Mark Lazarowicz: My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument for a major extension of the rail network. Given that one of his reasons for opposing HS2 is its cost, will he give us an estimate of the cost of all the various improvements and new lines that he has just described?

Kelvin Hopkins: Some two or three years ago, we had lunch with some people from Bechtel, one of the train manufacturing companies. We were talking about a cost of £4 billion or £5 billion at that time. We talked about an outside figure of £6 billion, but the Bechtel representative looked at the scheme and said he could do it for £3 billion. That would be a fraction of the cost even of Crossrail, which I support. This is not about cost, however; it is about whether HS2 is necessary. I think that we could achieve the desired result by doing it differently. We could upgrade existing routes to serve all the intervening towns, and we could provide the necessary capacity by getting all the freight off those lines and on to a new freight route. I ask the Department for Transport to take our scheme seriously, because that is what we need for the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind hon. Members that the four-minute limit on each Back-Bench contribution now applies.

4.54 pm

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): We in the Liberal Democrats have long supported high-speed rail, and we are delighted that the Government of whom we are part are going to deliver on that commitment. A sustainable transport system fit for the 21st century was at the heart of our 2008 policy paper, "Fast track Britain", our 2010 election manifesto and now the coalition agreement. We need increased capacity on our railways. Over the past 50 years, the length of our rail network has roughly halved, but since 1980 the number of passenger journeys has doubled. Quite predictably, that has fuelled overcrowding and led to eye-watering price hikes.

The extra capacity that the HS2 project will provide is not a luxury; it is a cold, hard necessity that we cannot afford to ignore. Network Rail estimates that by 2024 the existing line to Birmingham and the north-west will be full. Serious congestion on commuter services at the southern end of the line is already harming passenger welfare. Unfortunately, the key issue of capacity crisis has been obscured by an obsession with journey times. Yes, speed is important, but capacity and the number of trains is as important, if not more so.

High-speed rail will release huge amounts of capacity on existing lines: demand will no longer outstrip supply on parallel train routes. We need that capacity. The only alternative to building the high-speed railway line would be to build the same line, but for trains to run at slow speed. That would save us a small amount—about 9% of the construction costs—but we would not get the benefits of high speed.

We have heard that there is no need for a new line, that the few shortfalls can be tweaked and that we can cope with the inevitable increase in traffic. That is simply not the case. These proposals do not take proper account of the decades of upgrade work that would be required, with no alternative train line that could be fully used, or of the huge impact on reliability. If every possible train path is used on a line, there will be no capacity to cope if a single train is delayed: it throws everything out of whack. We need that capacity. Having massive infrastructure works on an already overcrowded line is not an option. It is not even a quick fix; it is completely unrealistic.

Mark Lazarowicz: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way on that point. Would not the undoubtedly massive disruption be a major negative economic factor to be included in the business case on the consequences of a high-speed line or of trying to upgrade existing lines?

Dr Huppert: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point; indeed, those consequences should be taken into account.

Hon. Members who oppose High Speed 2 should be aware that they are arguing for increased overcrowding on the west coast main line, increasing the chances of delayed commuter services, committing themselves to a disruptive and ineffective infrastructure programme, and delaying by only a matter of years the inevitable construction of a second line through the country.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Huppert: One last time, yes.

Jo Swinson: I thank my hon. Friend, and I feel that I should declare an interest as a regular user of the west coast main line who hopes to get home before midnight tonight. Does my hon. Friend agree with my constituents who strongly support this scheme, because although it does not extend to Scotland it will bring significant benefits to Scotland? Ultimately, we will need to go further; once this Y-shaped network is in place, we must have high-speed rail to Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Dr Huppert: As ever, I am delighted to agree with everything my hon. Friend says. Her constituents will benefit and the scheme will eventually need to continue, and I hope that it will be sooner rather than later.

There have been debates about the economics of High Speed 2, and I think we all agree that it is absolutely right that we scrutinise them. The solution to our chronic capacity problem must deliver value for money. We have heard debate about the exact facts and figures. The ones I have seen place some reliance on or about the generation of 40,000 jobs and £44 billion for the economy, but the real economic impact of high-speed rail lies in changes that are harder to quantify. For far too long we have focused on London and the south-east, and it is key that high-speed rail helps to address that problem. High-speed rail will enable businesses in our major cities to compete with those in the capital and south-east. It will provide larger talent pools and more potential clients, improve domestic tourism and help us to rebalance our economy away from the City.

We also need to look at the issue raised by the hon. Member for Wirral West (Esther McVey)—rail freight.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Huppert: I am afraid not; I do not have enough time.

The number of container freights on a north-south axis has grown by 56% in the past eight years, leaving freight services, particularly around Liverpool, in a complete bottleneck. There are companies that would like to use rail freight much more, but simply cannot find the space to put the containers on the railway. We constantly have this tricky balance between keeping commuter services for those travelling to London and ensuring that businesses in the north have access to the freight services they need. We need both. In an advanced country that cares about sustainable growth in every region, this is not the trade-off we need.

I wish I had more time to talk about the environmental consequences, but I would hope that all hon. Members agree that decarbonising domestic transport is a crucial measure that needs to be taken and that modal shift is important in achieving that. A shift of 6 million air trips and 9 million road trips on to rail is definitely a significant step forwards.

High-speed rail is not some idealistic dream based on shaky, long-term assumptions; it is a logistical imperative. High-speed rail is vital for the long-term sustainability of our country's infrastructure. The arguments for it heavily outweigh those against it, and I am delighted that the Government are taking it forward. I look forward to working closely with the Department for Transport, the Minister and other stakeholders to ensure that this project goes ahead and provides value for money for taxpayers and passengers alike, as well as providing the sustainable and efficient transport infrastructure that Britain is desperately lacking.

4.59 pm

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I support the extension of high-speed rail north of London, not just because I believe that it is in the best interests of my constituency and of Scotland but because I believe that it will benefit the whole United Kingdom in economic, transport and environmental terms. It makes sense for many reasons, including the need to increase capacity, which other Members have

[Mark Lazarowicz]

mentioned. Incidentally, the idea that the only people who use long-distance trains are rich businessmen will come as something of a shock to those who regularly use east-coast and west-coast lines. The development will, in fact, benefit many people throughout the country.

The existing network needs to be modernised in various ways, but it is ridiculous to suggest that it is possible to solve the capacity problem throughout Britain simply by modernising and upgrading it. As I said in an intervention, trying to replicate high-speed lines on the routes of existing lines would lead to decades of disruption and economic disbenefits. It is cheaper to build new lines, and, as the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert) pointed out, if new lines are to be built anyway, they might as well be high-speed lines if possible.

I do not support high-speed rail just for the sake of it—just because I want trains to travel as fast as they can. I accept that, in some localities, lower speeds may be acceptable for environmental reasons on the wider network. The fact remains, however, that reducing travel time between parts of the United Kingdom will create a number of benefits. Moreover, extending the line not just to Birmingham, Manchester and other parts of what, to me, constitutes southern England, but further north to Edinburgh and Glasgow, will produce the maximum economic and environmental benefits. The longer the journeys involved, the greater the possibility that passengers will travel by rail rather than air, and the more will be saved through high-speed rail. It will be possible to make significant cuts in air travel from Scotland to London if journey times can be reduced to less than three hours, and the same applies to road travel between Scotland and the north of England.

Kelvin Hopkins: In 1992, having freed up the line, British Rail ran a test train from King's Cross to Edinburgh at 140 mph, and did it in the same time as HS2 is proposing for its trains.

Mark Lazarowicz: I think that that makes my point about capacity. Obviously, the line could not operate like that every day, because a fair number of trains would be running at the same time.

Many of the business cases for the extension of the line to the midlands and the north of England do not take account of the economic benefits in business and tourist travel that would result if it were extended to Glasgow and Edinburgh. The increase in passengers would generate economic benefits, and the best business and economic case will be produced if there is agreement that the line should extend to Scotland, ensuring that we are not excluded from the system.

My only worry about the current proposal is that we in Scotland, and indeed those in the north of England, would be at risk if the line extended no further than Birmingham, Leeds or Manchester. Trains cannot start at every part of the country at the same time, but we certainly do not want them to arrive at Birmingham at 2026, at Manchester or Leeds at 2033, and then—if we are lucky—at Edinburgh or Glasgow at 2050. That would be extremely damaging to our relative economic prosperity in the UK.

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Would it not be useful if Transport Scotland conducted a feasibility study on a third phase of HS2, working from north to south?

Mark Lazarowicz: I see no reason for not doing that. The Scottish Government have already expressed their willingness to make some contribution to such work. I think it would be sensible to start the planning now and to include in the development phase the idea that the line should start from Scotland as well as from the south of England. High-speed rail is not a panacea for all our ills, but it does provide opportunities to create economic and environmental boosts. It will also provide jobs, not in the next five or so years, but nevertheless for a long period, and it will provide a major boost to our economy. In the long run, it will help the economies of many parts of the UK.

If this high-speed rail line is built but nothing is done around the stations—if there is no integrated transport or planning development around these rail hubs—we will not get the full benefits from the project. However, if local and central Government, and regions and cities, plan, they can make sure that high-speed rail brings major economic benefits, especially if it extends beyond Birmingham to the north of England and beyond. I support this project, therefore, and hope that we move ahead as quickly as possible, but Scotland must not be left at the end of the line.

5.5 pm

Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing the first debate on high-speed rail to be held in the Chamber. This is, however, the fourth debate that we have had on the subject since the election. We debated it in Westminster Hall on 23 November, 31 March and 13 July, so we have discussed it every four months or so. I notice that the period between debates is becoming ever shorter, so by the time HS2 delivers any value, we might be debating it every day.

Contrary to certain assumptions, I am the only Buckinghamshire MP whose constituency is not affected by the high-speed rail proposal. I know that your constituency is affected by it, Mr Speaker, and that your constituents have very strong views and that you submitted a substantial response to the consultation. The Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), responded robustly to the consultation on behalf of her constituents, delivering seven files of objections and evidence against HS2, which will cut a deep scar through the middle of the area of outstanding natural beauty in which her constituency sits. The Minister for Europe, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), and the Attorney-General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), were present earlier, and I know that their constituents are implacably opposed to HS2. Many other members of the Government also have objections, including the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), who also has strong views.

Although my constituents are not directly affected, they oppose HS2 on a number of grounds, but before I go on to explain my opposition, I wish to welcome the

Government's noble intentions. Whether in seeking the rejuvenation of the economy, the revitalisation of the north or the protection of the environment, or in trying to attract international inward investment, their intentions are indeed noble, but I regret to say that I do not support the means by which they seek to meet those ends.

The Secretary of State reflected on capacity, carbon and international competition in his evidence to the Transport Committee. On the question of the economics, as we have already learned in this debate, it is possible to refer to the titles and authors of reports both for and against the proposal. I am afraid that for every economist who comes down on one side of the debate, there will always be another economist on the other side. *The Economist* magazine came out against HS2, and when I put that to the Secretary of State, he was quick to rebut it and explain that he was about to write a letter.

The truth is that this project is awash with entrepreneurial risk. It is impossible to get hold of any hard facts showing whether it is a good idea. There is certainly an economic case, but I am afraid that it is ethereal: the moment we grasp it, it seems to disappear.

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend claims that there is no economic case, but does he recognise that there may be a strategic case?

Steve Baker: I enjoy serving on the Transport Committee with my hon. Friend, but I am not saying there is no economic case; rather, I am saying that we cannot nail down that case because of the entrepreneurial risk. In my view, when very large sums of capital are being allocated in an environment of entrepreneurial risk, entrepreneurs should bear that entrepreneurial risk.

I asked an international investor, "What do you think of HS2?" The answer was, "It would be wonderful to arrive fresh and relaxed in no time at all." I then asked, "Would you invest in it?" The response now was, "That's unfair. Of course I wouldn't invest in it." The market would not deliver high-speed rail, and that would be a market success, because to do so would be a misallocation of capital.

I put it to the Secretary of State that this project would socialise risk and privatise profit. He explained that that was to be expected, and we had to be realistic about it. I do not share that sense of "realism" on that point; I think that in reality this will be loss-making, in any commercial sense of the term. The whole point of loss is that it directs entrepreneurs to do something else with their capital, because if they are making a loss they are destroying value, not creating it.

I shall now deal with the carbon implications of this line. Something profound is going on in relation to carbon. The Secretary of State talked about the need to keep going until we were absolutely sure that we would decarbonise the roads. There is a vision at the heart of HS2 that we have not yet fully grasped. Given that I have 30 seconds available to me, and others wish to speak, I shall just refer to a letter that I sent shortly after I arrived in this place. I said that the Government could not afford high-speed rail, that they would not be able to afford it, that it would be a disaster if they did this—my basis for saying that was David Myddelton's book "They Meant Well: Government Project Disasters" —and that the Government should not do it in any event, because it should be left to entrepreneurs. Nothing that I heard during the Select Committee on Transport inquiry has changed my mind.

5.10 pm

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be able to contribute briefly to this debate. A number of points have been made by other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz), and I will not repeat those. However, I wanted to have the opportunity to make a couple of other points, particularly about Scotland.

First, I want to make the point clearly that better transport links have many and varied benefits for business and the wider economy, and that is as true in Scotland as it is in other parts of the United Kingdom. Sectors of the economy that are particularly important in Scotland—finance, tourism and the food and drink industries—respond positively to improvements in transport links. That is part of the case being made by business organisations, trade unions, Glasgow city council and Edinburgh city council, and a range of bodies in Scotland that very much support HS2. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Esther McVey) is no longer in her place, but I accept her point that a high-speed network alone does not draw business to the UK, and is not the complete answer. However, it is an important part of the answer, for Scotland as well as for the rest of the UK.

I wish to discuss the points made by the hon. Members for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and for Banbury (Tony Baldry) about the 40,000 jobs that would be created across the UK during the construction phase. I think I am right in saying that they both intimated that those jobs would be in the south-east of England. I say to both of them that that is not my experience of the jobs associated with other projects. For example, London 2012 work has gone to construction firms based in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Carlisle, Manchester, Newcastle—and, no doubt, many other places.

Phil Wilson: It is not just the route and its construction that are important; the rolling stock is important too. Hitachi, which is going to build a rolling stock factory in Newton Aycliffe, in my patch, has already said that it will bid to make the rolling stock for this route. That means that the north-east would benefit even before the route actually got to the north-east of England and created thousands of jobs.

Tom Greatrex: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I thank him for his intervention. What he says is also true of other firms—for example, those in my constituency that make the toughened glass for the windows of the rolling stock. A range of other supply chain benefits will accrue to a number of industries and companies, and will help to increase employability and skills in the economy.

Secondly, I wish to discuss the environmental impact. I do not want to talk about the number of trees that will be planted along the line, but there is an environmental impact and benefit through getting people to shift from air to rail. From my constituency it is about a 90-minute flight between Glasgow and London, and I have to admit that I fly more often than I probably should.

[Tom Greatrex]

Even when we take into account the time taken getting to and from airports, flying is still quicker than using the fastest of the trains on the west coast.

Dan Byles: The hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest that reducing the number of short-haul flights will somehow result in a carbon saving. Does he agree that it does not take the brains of an archbishop to work out that if those slots are freed up at the airports, they will be filled by long-haul flights, which will produce higher CO_2 emissions?

Tom Greatrex: The point I was about to make is that the number of people who fly from Glasgow or Edinburgh to London—they then perhaps stay in or work from London—is many more than those who then fly on somewhere else. The important point is that we may be able to move me, and some of the people I see every week—or on the weeks that I use the plane—because we would use the train more often if it was quicker. That is one of the benefits of extending high-speed rail into Scotland that we should not miss out on, although that may happen long after I have gone from this place. We should also remember that, as others have said, this is not necessarily just about business travel. Tourism and leisure, particularly in Scotland, will also be impacted on beneficially if we can get more people using rail instead of air.

Obviously, my constituency concern is in Scotland, but I am also concerned about how it relates to the UK as a whole. The Minister for Housing and Transport in the devolved Scottish Government gave evidence to the Transport Committee—some members of the Committee are in the Chamber this afternoon—and he intimated that he had some commitment from the Government that in the event of there being a separate Scottish state, the English Government would build up to the border. I am not sure where that statement came from, and I wonder whether the Minister will be able to inform the House when she responds.

The project could benefit the whole country, and the benefits for Edinburgh and Glasgow from the eventual extension of HS2 are tied up with the existence of the United Kingdom as one entity. It is interesting to suggest that a separate Scotland would need to build only from the border northwards, with the remaining English Government building up to the border. I am not sure how the economics of that would add up. I would be interested if the Minister could respond on that point or, if she is unable to do so today, if she could do so in writing.

HS2 is an important project with potential for economic development, environmental benefit and economic advantage for the central belt of Scotland. I accept completely that there are many questions about some aspects of it, but I do not think that those objections are strong enough to derail the whole project. It is important for the whole country, and extending it so that it brings real benefits to Scotland is very important. That is why I support HS2.

5.16 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): As a north-west MP, I wish to represent the concerns that my constituents have expressed to me both in correspondence and at meetings. The area of Cheshire that my constituency covers lies some 25 miles south of Manchester. Over recent years, journey times to London by rail have improved and the area is now well served, with a journey time of less than two hours from Euston. On the basis that stops reduce journey times, a new HS2 track is likely to run through or near my constituency but with no HS2 stops or links. An area that is currently well served might find not only that HS2 bypasses it, but that existing services become fewer and slower. Services from Crewe and Stoke-on-Trent, both of which serve my constituency, could suffer considerable disadvantage. Passengers from London using a new HS2 line could have to travel north to Manchester, then make a connection and return south on a local line. It is difficult to see how there would be much, if any, time saving on a journey from London.

Let me turn now to the economic regeneration argument. The north-west is a wide area, and although HS2 might benefit the area immediately around Manchester—assuming that is the key north-west HS2 stop—it is questionable whether such benefits would radiate across the north-west region so as to benefit constituencies, such as my own, that are further afield. There is the additional concern that the flow of economic regeneration could be towards London and away from the north-west, so a project designed to bridge the north-south divide could have the opposite effect.

The cost, some £32 billion, is perceived by many of my constituents as an inordinate amount of money at a time of severe economic pressure for the questionable benefits they will gain, particularly the many who do not use train travel at all. Several transport pressure points in my constituency are of far greater concern to them, and attention to those would immediately bring clear economic benefits to the area and the region, including freeing up not just local traffic but the M6 traffic flow from Birmingham up to the north-west.

Notably, those would include opening up to passengers the Middlewich rail link, which is currently used only for freight, improvements to junction 17 of the M6 at Sandbach, and action to protect the Holmes Chapel community from the excessive speed and volume of vehicles that they constantly endure. All those issues could be resolved at a fraction of the £51 million that I understand would be the cost of HS2 to my constituency.

When it comes to international travel, it is unlikely that an HS2 line north of Birmingham to Manchester would make much material difference to residents in my constituency, living as they do half an hour from Manchester and only a little further from Liverpool airport.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): May I clarify something? On the one hand, my hon. Friend is saying that living near Manchester airport is a good thing for her constituents—but is she also saying that living near the Manchester hub for high-speed rail would not be a good thing for them? I do not see how the two ideas run together.

Fiona Bruce: I am saying that to travel from London to the north-west by HS2 would not benefit my constituents materially. Nor would it benefit them to travel by HS2 down to the continent, because it is quicker, and certainly more economical with the current fares, to go from Manchester or Liverpool airport.

I agree that there is a strong case for enhancing the capacity of our inter-city rail network, including the west coast main line, but there are a number of solutions that could be achieved at a fraction of the cost of HS2 to my constituents. Many of those solutions have already been mentioned, such as improving provision for freight transportation or signalling. Others include improving the integrated regional network to take communities out of their cars in the north-west, increasing the number of platforms at Manchester Piccadilly to improve the commuter trains that are available, and increasing track numbers between Crewe and Manchester. I accept that the route of the extension from Birmingham to Manchester has not yet been specified, but I want to assure my constituents that if it runs through any part of my constituency, with the attendant environmental and other damage to farmland, residential areas and communities, they can be assured of my vigorous opposition to any such plan on their behalf.

5.16 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am worried that some Members on both sides will not have time to speak, so I shall be as brief as I can. I should be a prime advocate of this high-speed rail scheme, because I have in my constituency a railway estate that was constructed by the railway companies and then taken over by British Rail, which houses railway workers, and also because I have worked with the rail industry and its unions—the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, ASLEF and the Transport Salaried Staffs Association—for nearly 40 years to promote rail and every railway scheme.

As was mentioned earlier, as part of our campaign against the third runway we used the argument that we should invest in rail as an alternative. However, I have been absolutely alienated by the way in which the Government have handled this issue. Every other Member in the House is able to calculate the effect of the scheme on their constituency one way or the other—the advantages or disadvantages—but my constituents cannot, because of the way in which the Government are consulting on it. They are consulting on the route, except for the route into Heathrow, so my constituents and those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) are living in a no man's land of blight, because we do not yet know that route. We have had various indications and options but no direct consultation by the Government. Things are being done in two stages, and the second stage is meant to start in December, or any time now, but I believe that may be delayed as well.

What my constituents do know is that they face a continuing life of blight until this decision is made, because the vague options put forward by Arup impact on their homes and on a large amount of the social capital in the area, in terms of parks and open spaces. They also have relatives in the north of the London borough of Hillingdon who are losing their homes, and losing social facilities such as the excellent Hillingdon outdoor activities centre. There are also further threats to green belt land in the north of the borough. My two colleagues in Hillingdon who are members of the Government are unable to speak today, but they have worked hard behind the scenes as best they can to relay to the Government the uncertainties, the blight and the threat to people's lives that the proposals are forming.

I urge the Government to publish the proposals on the links to Heathrow as rapidly as possible, so that my constituents can know where the future lies for them and so that we can have a proper consultation. I also urge the Government to start looking at some of the details of the route, and at the blight and damage it is causing, to see how they can obviate some of the threats that it brings.

We should consider not just the link into Euston, but HS2's impact on north London overall. There is a wider debate to be had about whether the route is the most appropriate one, because the concerns about environmental damage are mounting up to such an extent that I am becoming increasingly convinced that the economic arguments do not outweigh the environmental damage threatened by the route.

I welcome the Transport Committee's examination of the proposal, but I find it difficult to know how it will examine the proposal when the Government still have not told us what their proposals are for the links to Heathrow. The Government should learn the lesson that it is not the right way to handle a scheme or a consultation when one of the prime elements of the scheme is not published or consulted on comprehensively in a way that links the whole scheme together. The Government have completely mishandled the scheme—and I speak as one who would be a natural advocate of the advancement of rail in this country.

5.25 pm

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): Given the time constraints, I do not know about high-speed rail, but this will be a high-speed speech. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on initiating the debate. We have had numerous debates on this issue. Although we do not agree, we always end up with a smile at the end. I suppose that there is a danger of repeating what other hon. Members have said, so I will try to keep my speech as brief as possible, but I want to give a Yorkshire perspective, as hon. Members from many regions around the country have spoken.

I am 100% in favour of High Speed 2. Not only is it needed, but it is inevitable and crucial if we are to be ready to compete in the future. Furthermore, if we do not face the realities of our transport infrastructure now, we will simply grind to a halt. We need to think about where we are now. It is worth reflecting that the railway industry's success has been unprecedented in recent years, with a doubling of passenger numbers, as has been mentioned. Pressure on the west coast main line is so severe that it is expected to be restricted at the very latest by 2025, despite huge upgrades already having taken place in recent years.

There are two routes to the north, not just one, and the problem at Leeds is equally bad. The capacity pressure at Leeds station is predicted to increase by another 40% in the coming years. Obviously, I travel from London to Leeds every week, and I am lucky if I find a seat between here and Peterborough in rush times. I have not got the luxury of switching on my laptop, because I have nowhere to sit.

I hear from those who oppose the scheme that the money could be spent on other things. Frankly, we have to take those measures anyway. That is why the Government have announced a raft of measures, including the

[Stuart Andrew]

lengthening of trains and extra carriages, to help us build up the capacity that we need. Frankly, just to do that alone would be like trying to fix a broken leg with a sticking plaster. This is not an either/or. As the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) said, we have to do both.

The west coast main line took years to be upgraded, causing massive disruption, and is already creaking at the seams. The problem is much bigger and requires us to think bigger and prepare for the future. We have heard lots about business. I was delighted when I heard the Government go for the Y route, which recognises that the north is an important part of our economic prosperity, and not to do so would stifle the prospect of growth.

Karen Lumley: Does my hon. Friend agree that HS2 will bring many more jobs to the midlands, because it will relieve air congestion in London and make Birmingham international, which is under capacity at the moment and an amazing airport to travel from, accessible for a lot more people to use?

Stuart Andrew: Absolutely. The benefits for the whole country are evident. The north-south divide is a problem that has faced successive Governments. Clearly, we are not arguing that HS2 will solve that alone—of course, it will not—but greater connectivity between our cities, such as Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester, to the rest of Europe can only help.

I want businesses in my constituency to enjoy having access to markets across Europe and the rest of the world. Transport links are crucial to making that happen. Too often, today's network cannot cope. I recently went to Airedale International in my constituency. It is a high-tech industry that has just created a training centre. It is begging for high-speed rail, because it has a lot of business down here, but it has the skills up in the north. Why cannot we help it to expand to have both?

We often hear that High Speed 2 is a white elephant, but studies have shown that it will bring about £44 billion of economic benefit and 40,000 jobs, which is not to be sniffed at. I did not see that white elephant when the Thameslink benefit-cost ratio came in at 2.2:1, or when Crossrail came in at 1.92:1.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Can my hon. Friend say how much of the money found for the project will be public money, and how much will be private?

Stuart Andrew: I would have to get the exact figures from my right hon. Friend the Minister. My point is that what we get back from HS2 will be far greater. If we look at the Jubilee line, the original benefit-cost ratio was 0.95:1. When it opened, that became 1.75:1, which shows that Governments are usually conservative in their estimates of the benefits that we can get from infrastructure. I did not hear about the white elephant when all the infrastructure projects I mentioned—southern infrastructure projects, funnily enough—were suggested.

I understand why Members are supporting and standing up for their constituents—of course they will do that—but they have sent confused messages. They say that they are against HS2 on environmental grounds, yet some of them say, "Build more roads instead." They say that they are against it on business grounds, yet they never opposed Crossrail or the Jubilee line. They say that they are against it because no one will use it, yet huge investment is needed in Euston station because it will not cope. We need to plan ahead and be bold, or in 10 years' time Members of Parliament will complain in the Chamber that we did not make the decisions now to bring about the modernisation of Britain's railways.

5.31 pm

Hugh Bayley (York Central) (Lab): I warmly welcomed the proposal for the High Speed 2 Y route when it was first introduced by Lord Adonis, and I congratulate the coalition Government on committing to the project. To be frank, today we have heard a lot of "economic" arguments presented by people who are really making political points about their constituency.

I say to the Government that some economic studies, such as that by PricewaterhouseCoopers, suggest that within three years of completion, the Government will be able to recoup their entire investment plus an extra £6 billion or £7 billion by passing the railway on to the private sector, but there are other economic cases that say exactly the opposite. Instead of clutching at straws, the Government have an obligation to come up with some sensible costings that are convincing.

I grew up in the Chilterns, and I understand the arguments that people from that region are making, but as someone who has not lived there for decades—I live in Yorkshire in the north of England—I have to say that the argument going on within the Conservative party about its heart and soul will be read as a debate between, on the one hand, one-nation Tories who want to invest in the future of the whole country and link it through new, modern, infrastructure, and, on the other, short-sighted southerners who frankly could not care less whether a railway goes beyond their county.

Angela Smith: I am still traumatised about having been described as a Manchester MP, because of course I represent a seat on the right side of the Pennines. The important point that my hon. Friend makes is that HS2 will help to bring the economies of the UK closer together. It will bring labour markets and businesses closer, and in that sense it is a catalyst for economic change and development. The points about economic cost are completely erroneous, and rather short-sighted and conservative.

Hugh Bayley: My hon. Friend has been a great champion of improving the rail infrastructure in Yorkshire and the north of England, and for connecting the north to jobs and markets in the south of England. We as British citizens have every bit as much right to be connected to our country's capital—and, through the capital, to Europe—as people living in the south of the country.

Andrea Leadsom *rose—*

Hugh Bayley: I give way to the hon. Lady, as she proposed the debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Gentleman. If HS2 is such a fantastic project, does he think that the private sector will finance it?

Hugh Bayley: That is a really good question, which I ask the hon. Lady to think about. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Steve Baker) made the same point, suggesting that the only test for whether there is an economic case is whether private investors would undertake a project on their own without substantial Government investment. Had that argument been applied to the building of the M40, the connection between his constituents in Wycombe and London, Birmingham and Oxford, it would never have been built. Exactly the same could be said with regard to the link between the hon. Lady's constituency and London via the M1.

Big public transport infrastructure projects need political backing and leadership from Governments, and this project had it from the previous Government and has it from the current Government, which will give investors confidence. However, it will not get that investor confidence without Government cash. Had we not had the public investment in motorways in the '60s and '70s, just think out of the box about the economic state that our country would be in now. There are some local interests to be protected, which I understand, but the real test for the Conservatives now is whether or not they are going to speak for the whole country. I remind hon. Members that the Conservative manifesto stated:

> "A Conservative government will begin work immediately to create a high speed rail line connecting London and Heathrow with Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. This is the first step towards achieving our vision of creating a national high speed rail network to join up major cities across England, Scotland and Wales. Stage two will deliver two new lines bringing the North East, Scotland and Wales into the high speed rail network."

I wish to make several points in the short time remaining. First, it is important that the high-speed wing of the "Y" that goes to Yorkshire and the north east leaves the line south of Birmingham, so that it can connect the three great east midlands cities of Leicester, Derby and Nottingham, through the Sheffield city region, to Leeds.

Secondly, it is essential that that line joins the existing east coast main line, which for some time will remain the link from Yorkshire to Scotland, south of York. The reason for that is partly self-interest—I am speaking as a York Member—and partly because York is a rail hub and the most interconnected station in the north of England, at least east of the Pennines. If we are to get feeder services, good connectivity with York is important.

Thirdly, the link to Scotland is extremely important, and the most viable first link should be from Leeds to Edinburgh and on to Glasgow, because that would provide connectivity with Tyneside and Teesside on the way, whereas pushing the line north from Manchester faces the environmental barrier of two national parks, and there are very few people, but many sheep, between Lancaster and Motherwell. I ask the Government to plan for the connection first to go through the east coast corridor.

Finally, it is not a case of investing in either the current infrastructure or High Speed 2. The country needs both and the Government must commit to both.

5.38 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I understand that I must sit down promptly at 5:40 pm, so this will be a super-fast contribution. I should make it clear that, although I serve on the Transport Committee, the comments I am about to make are entirely my own, as the Committee is yet to conclude its inquiry and produce its report.

I have looked at a huge amount of evidence on high-speed rail, from the UK and overseas. My conclusion is that I am in favour of high-speed rail but not yet convinced of the specifics of High Speed 2. I agree that there is a case for a new strategic north-south railway line in this country. As other Members have mentioned, the capacity on the west coast main line and other strategic routes will run out at some point, even with upgrades. It is a false choice between upgrading those lines, which we need to do anyway to address the immediate capacity problems, and building a new high-speed line. Both are required. I do not think that we can defer a decision for another 10 years, because we will be having exactly the same debate then and enduring severe overcrowding for passengers and freight.

I would argue against just upgrading the existing line, which could be done effectively only at the exclusion of those intermediate stops on the line for commuter services to places such as Milton Keynes. Both are necessary; we cannot just look at upgrading.

I am not going to get through anything like what I wanted to say, but there are a number of areas where High Speed 2 has not been looked at in the round. At the weekend, we saw the proposal for a new "Heathwick" high-speed line to connect Heathrow and Gatwick, but that has not been appraised in the overall—*[Interruption.]* My Whip tells me that I must sit down now, so I shall conclude my remarks.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Front Benchers that a very brief winding-up speech from the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) would be a courtesy and is customary on these occasions.

5.40 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): This has been a lively debate. We have had excellent contributions, with both sides of the argument coming from both sides of the House, and with opposite ends of the country making different cases.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing this debate and on the tenacity with which she contributed and intervened. She has crystallised one part of the "anti" argument, and on both sides a range of arguments has been played out throughout the debate, which has gone on for a number of years and will continue to rumble on. The hon. Lady crystallises the arguments of those on the "anti" side who simply do not accept the economic case and, if I may say so, will probably not accept any economic case that is made. Indeed, economic facts and figures are simply being talked past each other, and that is one of the problems that we have got ourselves into.

We have heard from Members, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson), who have expressed a genuinely held fear about the impact that the development may have

[John Woodcock]

on their communities, and we have heard from others, such as the hon. Member for Wycombe (Steve Baker), who raised fears for the natural environment, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) said, they are not nimbys: if they stand up for their own areas, they do so because that is absolutely what they have been sent to Parliament to do.

On the other side of the argument, however, we have people making a compelling case and stressing the overwhelming benefit that the project may bring to UK plc. Scottish Members, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex), stressed the importance of the project to Scotland, even on the existing proposals, and it was good to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) make the case for the manufacturing opportunities that the project will bring at a parlous time for train manufacturing in the UK.

The hon. Members for Cambridge (Dr Huppert) and for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) crystallised the vital argument about capacity, and my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) pointed to the studies that dispel the fear that the project will benefit primarily the south of England, stating absolutely rightly that it can bring the local economies of this great country closer together.

Labour in government delivered the country's first high-speed railway. The Y-shaped route of High Speed 2, which would link our cities, is a Labour initiative, and I can state clearly today that that vital lifeline of economic growth will be built by a future Labour Government and backed by Labour in opposition. Provided that the Government's nerve holds, we will work across the Floor of the House to secure parliamentary approval for the legislation needed to deliver the scheme, and if their resolve fails, we will be on hand to bring them to their senses.

We looked at our commitment afresh in opposition, and we were right to do so. This project will require sustained and substantial investment at a time when public finances will unquestionably be tight. We looked at the business case again, examined the counter-proposals, and listened to the sincere and heart-felt objections expressed alongside the views of passionate advocates of the scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), the shadow Secretary of State, has travelled the proposed route talking to and listening to the communities that will be affected. Our conclusion is that the business case stacks up.

Of course we should debate the relative benefits of reducing journey time, though we believe they are clear, and of course we must continue to scrutinise the precise route. However, the capacity issues on the existing main lines are so great that we believe there is no credible alternative to building a new line. Closing existing lines to carry out improvements would bring chaos to millions of journeys and could be a real economic drag throughout the long and costly process. It is vital that we learn the lesson of the west coast main line modernisation programme. We will be failing future generations if we pass up the opportunity to employ the most advanced technology available.

It is because we have looked afresh at the programme that we can reaffirm our commitment to it as one that we began in government and will follow through. I look forward to the day in 2018 when—under a Labour Government, of course—we cut the first sod of earth on the project.

A consensus across the House is important to boost confidence, but we will continue to press the Government on serious concerns. First, of course, there is the route. The Government must listen carefully to concerns about the exact nature of the route and treat with respect the genuine objections raised, making accommodations where feasible and adequate compensation where not. Secondly, we must address the problems of connecting to the line, many of which have been raised today. I hope that the Minister will explain, for example, why the potential need for extra capacity at Euston has not been acknowledged. There are many issues on which I do not necessarily agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), but he was right to question why Heathrow is being dealt with in a second stage and to raise the unsatisfactory nature of that approach for his constituents and for people wanting to know how these things will connect up.

Thirdly, there is a need for certainty about the line going all the way up to Leeds and Manchester. If the Government are genuine about extending it beyond Birmingham, they should not delay legislating on Leeds and Manchester until the next Parliament. We need one hybrid Bill covering both phases of the line. Yes, that Bill will be larger, but construction need not be delayed by a single day. We need certainty for investors and for the travelling public, and a single Bill would give greater certainty, not less.

Fourthly, we must ensure that the whole country benefits from high-speed rail. I have been encouraged by how businesses right across the north, including Barrow shipyard in my own patch, have been lobbying for this investment to happen. Finally, we must make this a high-speed line for the many, not the few. The Government need to put their cards on the table. What sort of railway do they want High Speed 2 to be? Labour Members are clear: we cannot have a railway for the wealthy few where sky-high fares deter the majority from being able to travel.

I thank hon. Members who have contributed to the debate and the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire for securing it. I have been pleased to restate Labour's deeply held, unequivocal commitment to this project, and we look forward to working across the House to make it happen.

5.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I welcome the extensive support across the House for the Government's proposals and in particular the clear expression of support from Her Majesty's official Opposition. My time is too short to refer specifically to everyone, but I would like to make special mention of my hon. Friends the Members for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), who are in their places. Their exacting scrutiny of the Government's proposals has been effective and I welcome their robust input into the debate. I also mention my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), who is also in his place and who strongly supports this scheme.

I first emphasise that the Government fully recognise the legitimate concerns of communities along the preferred route about the potential impact on their local environment. That has been raised by Members such as the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson). About half of the preferred route that we inherited has been changed. In the sensitive Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty, all but two miles of the preferred route is in a tunnel or deep cutting, or follows an existing transport corridor. I am confident that we can and will make further improvements as a result of the consultation responses that are under consideration as we speak.

I am also conscious of the enormous importance of getting the right answer at Euston. We will, of course, scrutinise carefully all the representations made by the right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson).

Dan Byles: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Villiers: I will not just yet, because my time is short.

HS1 is an example of how high-speed rail can be designed in a way that mitigates and minimises the impact on local communities. Equal care will be needed in phase 2 with the link to Heathrow. Again, we will be careful to listen to the concerns of the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and his constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) spoke about the predictions of passenger growth for HS2. The consultation document forecasts that passenger demand will roughly double for long-distance services on the west coast main line, as was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew). That projection is over 30 years and is based on modest growth rates of about 2% a year. If anything, those numbers are cautious when one takes into account the fact that demand between London and Manchester rose by almost 60% over the four years to 2008 and that overall long-distance demand has grown every year since 1997 at an average of 5% a year. There is a wide-ranging consensus, which has been echoed by many Members today, that the southern end of the west coast route will be completely full within 10 to 15 years, or possibly sooner as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond).

Christopher Pincher: Will the Minister say why she persists in using version 4.1 of the "Passenger Demand Forecasting Handbook", which Sir Rod Eddington says offers wildly inaccurate demand predictions? Why does she not use version 5.0, which is waiting on her desk for her to sign off? It offers much more reasonable demand projections and would allow her to pursue options other than HS2.

Mrs Villiers: We believe that version 4.1 gives a more robust analysis of passenger demand forecasts. I am confident that whichever methodology one uses to predict passenger demand, we face a capacity time bomb on the west coast main line. Even our efforts in undertaking the biggest programme of rail capacity improvement for 100 years will not be enough to meet our long-term capacity needs.

We desperately need additional inter-city transport capacity, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert). No responsible Government can afford to sit back and ignore this problem. High-speed rail provides the best way to meet that pressing economic need. Contrary to the allegations of its detractors, HS2 is not and has never been a project designed to shave a few minutes off the journey time to Birmingham; it is about delivering the inter-city transport links that are crucial for the future success of our economy in this country, in both the north and the south.

Dan Byles: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Villiers: No, I will not.

No upgrade of the existing railways is capable of matching the increase in capacity that HS2 will deliver. A fundamental problem with the alternative schemes is that they rely on upgrades of the existing line. By definition, they cannot release any capacity on the existing network. The release of capacity is a fundamental part of the benefit that can be provided by HS2. As my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey pointed out, the alternatives are simply sticking-plaster solutions. Of the alternatives formally considered, only one had a positive benefit-to-cost ratio. The solution put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire of tinkering with first and second class is simply not credible; nor are the 51m proposals, which have not been adequately costed, do not take into account the massive cost of signalling remodelling and cannot deal with a peak-time crisis. Furthermore, trying to defuse the capacity time bomb with any kind of work on the existing line would involve extensive disruption, as was pointed out by the shadow Minister, and that would come not long after the people on this route had to put up with a decade of disruption for the last upgrade of the west coast line.

Concern has been expressed that our analysis does not take account of the fact that time on a train can be used productively. However, stress-testing our business case figures shows that factoring in productive time on trains actually slightly strengthens the case for high-speed rail. The additional capacity provided by HS2 would enable more people to get a seat and get some productive work done on a train. What is more, failing to deliver a new line would lead to ever more serious overcrowding problems, making it even more difficult to work on a train. The fact that Stop HS2 keeps making the point about work demonstrates the overall weakness of its argument.

Dan Byles: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Villiers: No.

A fundamentally weak point put by the opponents of HS2 is the claim that it will disadvantage the regions that it will serve. That is startling when one thinks of the vigorous campaigns fought around the world by towns and cities desperate to connect to the high-speed rail networks that their countries are building. It is no surprise to hear of those campaigns when one takes on board the fact that Euralille has the third largest office complex in France, beaten into second place by Lyon's Part-Dieu TGV station with its 5.3 million square feet

[Mrs Villiers]

of office space—economic development that would have been entirely impossible without the high-speed rail network in France. Survey work undertaken in relation to the TGV network clearly showed that the regions it served, rather than Paris, had experienced the greatest boost in their economies. It is simply not credible to claim that the north and the west midlands will be disadvantaged by high-speed rail, as evidenced by the strong support for the project in those areas.

If we need evidence of the startling benefits that transport links can bring, we have only to walk 30 yards from the Chamber to Westminster tube station and get on the Jubilee line extension. Now one of the biggest financial centres in the world, Canary Wharf simply would not exist without the Jubilee line extension. The benefits of high-speed rail will be felt right across the north and midlands, with a boost to the whole country's economy.

I reiterate that our assumptions about the viability of HS2 and the expected fare box do not factor in or depend on a premium for high-speed services. Our appraisal is based on fares in line with the existing services. In response to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire, the level of fares on Southeastern has absolutely nothing to do with HS1; neither do the performance issues on that route.

It is clear that in the longer term, the benefits of high-speed rail will exceed its construction costs, but the reality is that if we examine the scale of the project and average out the cost over the years it will take to deliver it, we see that it is by no means out of line with projects such as Crossrail. The claim that the rest of the rail network would be starved of funds if HS2 went ahead is undermined by the fact that the Government are committed to delivering the largest and most extensive package of rail capacity upgrades since the Victorian era, a number of which will carry on into the period during which HS2 is expected to be under construction.

Finally, I refer to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Steve Baker), who rather let the cat out of the bag. If arguments such as his had been accepted, we would never have built the channel tunnel, HS1, the Jubilee line extension or the motorway network. Not even the Victorian railways on which we still depend would have been built, because although they were built by the private sector, the people who built them lost their shirts and largely went out of business.

The Government's two most important goals are to address the deficit and to secure economic growth. Improving our transport infrastructure has a central part to play in delivering those goals, and we believe that high-speed rail can and should have a central role in our transport plans for the future.

5.58 pm

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the many colleagues who have spoken in this debate, and I am sorry for those who wanted to speak and did not. In particular, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Dan Byles), who was instrumental in securing the debate. I am sorry that we did not get to hear from him.

I reiterate that I think we can all agree that there is a massive capacity problem not just on the west coast main line but across our entire rail network, and it is absolutely right that the Government should consider ways to improve capacity, rail infrastructure and economic development across the UK. However, I go back to the fact that HS2 is not a "build it and they will come" project. We should not look at a £32 billion expenditure as something that we can just do on the hoof and expect the return to come. There has been plenty of anecdotal evidence today—so-and-so says this, and so-and-so says that—but I have heard no hard evidence that HS2 will be good value for money. This is not our money; it is the taxpayers' money. As my right hon. Friend the Minister so eloquently said, let us hope that we, like the Victorian railway owners, do not go bust and lose our shirts over it.

6 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (19 OCTOBER)

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 19 October, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motions in the name of Edward Miliband as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on the Motions may continue, though opposed, until the moment of interruption and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply—*(Bill Wiggin.)*

Anchor Housing Association

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Bill Wiggin.)*

6 pm

Mike Wood (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this debate and thank those organisations, particularly Age UK, that since the schedule was announced have sent me a good deal of relevant background information.

At a time when figures show that those aged 65 and over in our country number 10 million and that the figure is set to grow to well over 16 million by 2035, the consensus seems to be that long-term care in this country is in crisis and has been for some time. We see continuing concern about Southern Cross and more generally about how we get funding right for a group with considerable needs and to whom we owe an obvious duty of care. The Government recognised that when they committed a further £7.2 billion to the delivery of social care in the four years to 2014-15. I know that the Government intend to release a White Paper next spring and have before them, among other evidence, the recommendations of the Dilnot commission, the Law Commission and the Health Select Committee regarding failings in the Care Quality Commission. However, following a recent experience in my own constituency, I would like to add one more small set of recommendations, to place alongside those weighty reports, as the Government wrestle with this extremely difficult set of issues.

After boundary changes before the 2010 general election, I inherited an area of Dewsbury where Anchor housing association has run a sheltered housing complex for more than 30 years. Barnfield houses 51 elderly—in some cases, very elderly—people, the vast majority of whom express themselves as happy to be there and say that they want to stay in what they have been led to regard as their home for life. Throughout the past three years, for instance, occupancy rates have been over 96%, which seems to underline how popular a place it is. Several of those 51 residents have lived in the complex for the whole 31 years of its existence.

At a week's notice, however, in the middle of August, residents were called together and told that Anchor was reviewing the future of the complex in view of the projected capital expenditure needed to bring facilities up to modern standards. The truth is that Anchor wishes to wash its hands of the establishment and, by definition, of my 51 constituents. Two options were outlined: first, closure and, secondly, the transferral of ownership to another social landlord. Although the latter was very much its preferred course of action, residents were left in no doubt that if efforts along those lines failed, they would have to be found alternative accommodation. I was not at the meeting, but I am reliably informed that many residents started to weep at this news. Resident Mike Neville described the meeting addressed by Anchor's Andrew Railton, the charity's head of operational transitions—whatever that means—as

> "without warmth, concern or compassion. A shocking way to do things. Anchor's slogan is 'happy living for years ahead'. This is meaningless marketing language to the people of Barnfield".

I have since met the residents of Barnfield three times. They remain shocked and angry, especially as Anchor gave itself until November—three whole months—to tell them of their fate. However, having overcome the initial shock, residents have not taken things lying down. The estimable Mike Neville approached my office and, with Chris Allinson and Sandra and Ken Garfield, has liaised with us throughout. Residents presented a statement to Anchor outlining their wish to remain in situ and, with varying degrees of success, have attempted to contact members of the Anchor board and senior management. They have been supported throughout by local clergy—in particular, Rev. Tom Hiney, Rev. Ann Pollard and Rev. Lisa Senior. Residents have also continued to benefit from the support of the live-in warden, Jan Crabtree, and her husband. As an Anchor employee, Jan has been placed in an invidious position as a result of a decision in which she had no part. Residents have told me how much they continue to value her care and attention.

When I finally met the chief executive of Anchor, Jane Ashcroft, she was happy to apologise for any distress caused to my constituents, but felt that the meeting—which she had not attended any more than I had—had been properly conducted by her colleague and could give no assurance that residents would not have to move out if a buyer for the complex could not be found. At my request, she later provided me with financial figures and supporting documentation that convinced me even more that Anchor's decision to leave Barnfield had nothing to do with its stated reasons for review. The complex has high occupancy levels and appears to be self-sustaining financially.

We must ask, therefore, why a charity and the largest social landlord in the country should treat its residents—including some who suffer from mental health problems—in such a fashion, putting their well-being and perhaps even their life chances at risk. Why are the very people whom the charity claims to be serving the very last people to be considered? Indeed, many questions need answering, some of which were put in a hard-hitting article by our campaigning local newspaper, *The Dewsbury Reporter*, not least of which was: where has the money paid in rents and service charges over 31 years gone? That is especially important because as recently as May this year, couples such as Mr and Mrs Thorne were being admitted to the complex. As a couple in their 80s, they then had to spend more than £4,000 of their savings to have the property rewired and brought up to liveable standards.

Anchor refused to answer any of those questions, but did produce a statement pointing to its responsibilities as a charity—responsibilities, it would seem, to everybody except my constituents, the very people whom Anchor is supposed to be in business to serve. However, in using the word "business" we are perhaps beginning to get to the nub of the problem. I have no doubt that Anchor has taken a strategic decision in the interests of its business to pull out of establishments such as Barnfield. We may never know when that was decided or by whom, but it was certainly before the matter was broached with Barnfield residents on 9 August.

The decision also appears to have been taken without the benefit of any consultation, and not just with residents but with our local authority, Kirklees, with which Anchor is supposed to work in partnership on such matters. The strategy may make perfect sense for the charity as a whole—although some openness about its real objective would have allowed us to know that—but what is

[Mike Wood]

unacceptable is to achieve that goal at the cost of enormous worry and uncertainty to that group of vulnerable elderly people. In the absence of being consulted or considered, they are owed much more than a rather easily produced apology; they are owed an explanation.

Based on this experience, which I have no reason to believe is unique, may I put it to the Minister that charities and third sector organisation should be judged by the results of their actions, just as the management of Southern Cross should be? They appear to need every bit as much regulation and oversight as those that are engaged in this sector primarily to make money. It would appear that, if they are not careful, charities and not-for-profit companies can become just as divorced from the people they are supposed to serve as the most rapacious money-making outfit, and, in this regard, I think size matters.

In my view, organisations such as Anchor have long since reached the tipping point beyond which their prime considerations, while perhaps understandable by their own lights, have less and less connection with the needs and wishes of their own residents. They exist for the good of the charity as a large and complex organisation with a turnover of millions of pounds per annum, and not necessarily for the good of those to whom they provide services.

I want to ask the Government to consider capping the size of social landlords, preferably at about half the size of Anchor as it is constituted.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood: I will not, at this moment.

Will the Government also place a responsibility on the reformed Care Quality Commission to work especially closely with providers that, through longevity and acquisition, have long since lost sight of whom they operate to serve? Will the Minister also ensure that social landlords make their strategic plans public, so that they are open to scrutiny and can be tested by the CQC, the Charity Commissioners, local authorities and, most importantly, residents and prospective residents and their families?

In essence, we need elderly people to be treated with respect. My constituent Lawrence Tomlinson, the owner of Ideal Care Homes, has shown that first-rate facilities can be provided in the care home sector while ensuring a good return for the owners of those homes. I saw that for myself when I visited Lydgate Lodge in my constituency only last week. But, as with the other elements in our care of the elderly, provision is very patchy. As recommended by Dilnot, we must get rid of the postcode lottery and establish a national framework for eligibility, as favoured by the Law Commission.

Lastly, I believe that we should examine seriously the case for a Cabinet Minister for older people—ironically, as advocated by Anchor in its Grey Pride campaign. The care system is in crisis as the size of our elderly populace grows, yet I must point out, without being too unkind, that the responsibility for improving the situation is spread haphazardly over several Government Departments. It is unclear whose job it is in Government to defend the interests of elderly citizens, just as it was unclear who was responsible for looking after the good of the residents of Barnfield in the vast charity that was supposedly helping to care for them.

The Minister is not yet the Minister for the elderly—*[Interruption.]* He appears to be making a bid for the job, and I would certainly support such an appointment. I hope that he will be able to give me at least an initial view on these few practical suggestions for improvements in the care for our elderly citizens that we all want to see.

6.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Robert Neill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Mike Wood) on securing a debate that is important both for general policy and for the specific concerns of his constituents. I also congratulate him on the careful and thoughtful way in which he presented his case. By responding on both those points, I shall endeavour to do the best justice I can to it in the time available.

I would like to start with the more specific issue of the position of Anchor. As the hon. Gentleman has rightly said, Anchor is a large provider—one of the leading providers of housing for older people. It has met those people's needs for some 40 years, delivering a variety of products. As has been said, it is a registered charity, which makes it independent and non-profit-making. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is responsible for making its own business decisions, so the scope for Government intervention is generally constrained by the law relating to charities. Equally, however, Anchor must adhere to Charity Commission guidelines and, as a private registered provider, to the guidance of the social housing regulator—the Tenant Services Authority.

As I understand it, and as the hon. Gentleman fairly set out, Anchor has come to a view about its involvement with Barnfield for the future and has set out options for the residents. Its preferred option is to find another provider to take this development on. Let us hope that that is the solution; it would be for the best, enabling Barnfield residents to remain in their homes. It is worth noting that Anchor will need to apply to the regulator for consent to do so. That will not remove the uncertainty that I appreciate is playing on the minds of the residents. If it is any comfort to the hon. Gentleman, I had a similar case with a much smaller charity in my own constituency before the general election. It had been going on for some time. I understand people's feelings, because I met the constituents involved in that case.

Anchor is required to obtain the regulator's consent before disposing of the property. It is up to the regulator to decide to grant consent, and it is normal policy to withhold consent for the disposal of property unless that disposal is to another social housing provider or to the tenants. There are some safeguards; one cannot prejudge any particular case.

In view of the hon. Gentleman's comments, it is worth observing that the regulator also requires providers to engage in meaningful consultation with the relevant local authority and with tenants before seeking consent for a disposal. Housing associations registered with the regulator are also required to consult tenants if it is proposed to change their landlord or make a significant change in the management arrangements. The hon. Gentleman's constituents might wish to consider that in the context of contact with the TSA.

There is also a regulatory requirement to have in place a procedure for dealing with formal complaints. If, having completed that process, residents remain unhappy, they have the right to raise a complaint with the housing ombudsman. It then becomes a matter for the ombudsman to deal with. Areas of maladministration that fall under the ombudsman's remit include, for example, failure of a body to apply its own procedures, failure to comply with legal obligations or codes of practice, unreasonable behaviour, or having treated the complainant personally in a heavy-handed, unsympathetic or inappropriate manner. That might be relevant; I, of course, have to be independent.

That is the position, so it is worth reflecting on the fact that steps have to be gone through before a disposal can be taken. I understand that Anchor is contacting residents at regular intervals, and I hope that is the case. Obviously, the hon. Gentleman is closer to the ground there than I am.

The broader point is well made, given that we all get older. Whether I would be better qualified to be a Minister for elderly people by virtue of my greater experience in comparison with other hon. Members might have been the cause of some merriment. I believe we all want to maintain our independence and to keep our own home. I have an 87-year-old mother, and I know exactly what her view is.

Tracey Crouch: I recently initiated an Adjournment debate on older people in Westminster Hall, during which I drew attention to the acute pressure on housing for our older generation. Given that that pressure will become a great deal worse, will the Minister consider the constructive suggestion that some flexibility should be applied to the new homes bonus? That might well give developers an incentive to ensure that older people are catered for specifically in the future.

Robert Neill: That is an interesting idea, and this is not the first occasion on which I have heard it raised by my hon. Friend and by people in the sector. I will convey it, along with a number of other suggestions, to the Minister for Housing and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), who will consider what is the most appropriate action.

The complexity of the system often makes choices difficult, but the Government are helping by supporting the provision of information and advice. In May I announced funding of £1.5 million for FirstStop, which offers expert advice to older people, their families and their carers on housing and associated care and money issues. It is a national service, delivered in partnership with specialist providers and local partners. One of the coalition's aims is to give people access to better information. "The Coalition: our programme for government" includes the commitment to

"help elderly people live at home for longer",

which may involve their staying in the family home but may also mean a move to more suitable accommodation.

We must ensure that there is enough suitable accommodation, and to that end we have embarked on a number of policy reforms. We expect to deliver up to 170,000 new affordable homes between 2011 and 2015—an increase on our original estimate of 150,000, including 80,000 under the affordable homes programme. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), we have also introduced the new homes bonus, which is a much more transparent incentive. We want to ensure that local authorities have sufficient flexibility by "un-ring-fencing" funds in response to local needs.

We have announced that we will raise right-to-buy discounts to make buying more attractive to tenants who want to stay put. However, we are determined not just to fulfil residents' aspirations for home ownership, but to ensure that every home bought under the right to buy will fund a new affordable home, over and above our existing plans. That, along with a number of other matters, will be included in the housing strategy. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will take a particular interest in the way in which it deals with the sector that he has raised tonight.

We know that we must encourage the provision of a wide range of accommodation to suit the changing needs and circumstances of older people. The hon. Gentleman has made a number of thoughtful suggestions. As I have said, there are examples of good practice among charities of varying sizes, but we must nevertheless be alert to risk, and I think that the Charity Commission and other regulatory bodies provide the appropriate means of dealing with that. We want results that will ultimately benefit those receiving the provision.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand if I say that capping size is not necessarily the answer. What is important is ensuring that charities are responsive. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Local Government has expressed a desire to encourage greater transparency in the social housing provider sector as a whole, and I hope that that will deal with the hon. Gentleman's specific points.

Question put and agreed to.

6.24 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Monday 17 October 2011

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Academies (GCSE Results)

1. **Annette Brooke** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): What assessment he has made of the 2011 GCSE results for academies; and if he will make a statement. [74418]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): The 2011 GCSE self-reported figures from academies suggest an increase of 5.6 percentage points in the proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and maths. That increase is, once again, greater than the historical national improvement rates for all maintained schools. Individual 2011 GCSE school level results will be not be available until January 2012.

Annette Brooke: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I congratulate all those pupils who did so well this summer, but I seek assurances from him. In the event of less than 10% of an academy's pupils achieving five A to C grades at GCSE, or even of less than 5%, would he expect full involvement from the local authority, playing a key role? Also, will he be giving support from his Department?

Mr Gibb: Where the performance of an academy is unacceptably low, we will ensure that urgent action is taken to bring about sustained improvement. There is nothing to prevent local authorities from offering help to underperforming academies, but ultimately it is for the academy or the sponsor to decide whether to accept that help. The success of the academies programme has meant a changing role for local authorities and they will have an important role to play as the champions of pupils and parents in the area, ensuring both sufficiency and quality of places.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Many head teachers and governors in my constituency tell me that they feel pressurised into converting to academy status, not only because of the financial incentives but because it is the Government's policy that as many schools as possible should become academies. Could the Minister say whether that is the case and explain the role of local authorities in state education in future?

Mr Gibb: There is no compulsion to convert to academy status, but all the evidence from around the world is that three factors give rise to higher performance: autonomy, high-quality teaching and external accountabilities—and it is autonomy that head teachers seek when they apply for academy status. There is no incentive, financially, to become an academy, as academies are funded on exactly the same basis as maintained schools.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Wootton Bassett comprehensive was, until Friday, an outstanding comprehensive, having achieved outstanding results in all five categories. Will the Minister join me in congratulating what from today will be called Royal Wootton Bassett academy on its achievement?

Mr Gibb: I congratulate both Royal Wootton Bassett and the school. It is a tremendous achievement for the town, and the academic results that my hon. Friend cites are a tribute to the teachers at that school.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to join the Minister in welcoming the GCSE results of academies in 2011; their progress in English and maths is especially welcome. Some of them have focused successfully on improving vocational education—progress which is not reflected in the Government's E-bac. Will the Secretary of State give serious consideration to creating a technical baccalaureate as has been proposed by many, including the Minister's noble friend Lord Baker?

Mr Gibb: May I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post? I know that he has a passion for education and I look forward to working with him in the months and years ahead.

The English baccalaureate is designed to increase the take-up in our schools of history, geography and modern foreign languages, which has declined significantly in recent years, particularly in modern languages since 2004. That is something we seek to reverse. However, the E-bac is sufficiently small to enable pupils to take a vocational subject in addition to the E-bac and to take music, art, economics—*[Interruption.]*—and religious education, indeed, and all the other subjects that pupils want to take.

Stephen Twigg: We will return to that in later questions.

The Government give the impression that they are interested only in the progress of academies and free schools. I welcome the great results that academies have achieved, but can the Minister tell me what proportion of the schools that he and the Secretary of State have visited are neither academies nor free schools?

Mr Gibb: Certainly the vast majority of schools that I have visited are maintained schools, and that may well be the case for the Secretary of State—we can send the hon. Gentleman the figures. It is important that we raise standards right across the board, and that is why the Secretary of State has raised the floor standards for all schools to 35% this year and to 40% from next year.

By the end of the Parliament, we expect all schools to have at least half of their pupils achieving five good GCSEs.

GCSE Mathematics

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): Question 2, Mr Speaker—no, Question 3.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is discussing mathematics.

3. **Duncan Hames:** What his policy is on the inclusion of financial education in the mathematics GCSE. [74420]

The Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (Mr John Hayes): I should have more than a normal spring in my step today, because my son, William, passed his 11-plus, and I heard about it this weekend.

The Government are currently reviewing the national curriculum, which will go out to public consultation in the new year. We will await the outcomes of that work before making any decisions on the content of GCSE mathematics, to ensure that it aligns with the new national curriculum and reflects the core mathematical knowledge and skills that young people need.

Duncan Hames: Only in this place could three follow one.

Having taken as many maths qualifications as I possibly could when at school, I certainly appreciate the eternal beauty of geometry, but does the Minister not accept that, for many school leavers in today's world, it is more valuable to understand the true value of a compound annual growth rate on an investment or, more likely, the annual percentage rate on a loan?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is right that finance education matters. Indeed, as a governor of the George Ward school in his constituency, he will take seriously the role that core mathematical education plays in providing people with those applied mathematical skills necessary for their well-being and our collective well-being. The Government take that seriously, and we will certainly work to ensure that maths does the job that it should.

Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School

4. **Mr Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What progress has been made towards resolving the dispute at the Cardinal Vaughan memorial school. [74421]

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): In the past week, I have spoken to parents at the Vaughan and the diocesan authorities. I am confident that the appointment of a new headmaster will bring new harmony.

Mr Leigh: I thank the Secretary of State most warmly for his personal efforts in trying to resolve this matter and in ensuring that, finally, the diocese caved in last week and a head teacher was appointed in line with parent wishes, but I wonder what lessons can be learned—in particular, to ensure that, in future, education authorities, whether or not diocesan, understand that the whole ethos of our policy is to enable parents, not education authorities, to have the dominant say in the governance of schools?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. The Vaughan is an outstanding school, and the diocese and the Department are determined to do everything possible to ensure that it remains outstanding in the future. One of the changes that is being made in the other place by my noble Friend Lord Hill is a change to the provision that relates to governors, to ensure that parent governors and foundation governors who are drawn from the ranks of parents accurately represent the parents' wishes, because part of the Vaughan's success has been the close relationship between the parents who love the school and the teachers who have made it so great.

GCSE Mathematics

5. **Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): What consideration he has given to offering two GCSEs in mathematics. [74422]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): We are reviewing the national curriculum requirements for mathematics and will take decisions on the content and number of maths GCSEs in the light of the review. A pilot of a pair of mathematics GCSEs—applications of mathematics and methods in mathematics—began last September and continues to 2013. Evidence from the pilot will also inform our decisions.

Justin Tomlinson: As part of the review, may I urge the Minister to provide an opportunity to include financial education as part of the syllabus?

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend has worked tirelessly on financial education, and the all-party group on financial education for young people, which he chairs, is about to produce a report, following its inquiry into the issue. As he has said, financial education is important, and we will look carefully at his report when it is published and its conclusions will be taken into account as part of the national curriculum review and the review of personal, social and health education.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): On 19 June, an AQA GCSE maths examination paper contained an error, along with two other exam papers. How could that be, as a week earlier, we were told that every exam paper had been rechecked for mistakes? What has gone wrong, and what explanation has been given to the Minister?

Mr Gibb: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise these issues. The number of errors in exam papers this summer was unacceptable. A review is being conducted by Ofqual, which will report later in the year. As a consequence of the errors that took place this summer, we have reviewed Ofqual's powers, and in another place, we are considering introducing into the Education Bill new powers for Ofqual to fine the awarding organisations when they are not delivering high-quality exams without error.

Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the distinction between methods and applications is spurious in a subject that is all about practice, and that instead we should have mathematics and additional mathematics at GCSE, or pure and applied? That would be more logical and more mathematical.

Mr Gibb: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her passion for the subject of maths education in this country. She is right to raise, and continue to raise, the issue. We will wait to see the outcome of the pilot of the twin maths GCSEs, and we will take into account its conclusions before considering what further reforms to maths GCSE we will make.

English Baccalaureate

6. **Tony Baldry** (Banbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on student choices of the English baccalaureate. [74423]

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): A survey of nearly 700 schools indicates that the English baccalaureate is having an immediate impact on subject choices. The numbers of students electing to study modern foreign languages, geography, history, physics, chemistry and biology are all up.

Tony Baldry: Is my right hon. Friend aware that secondary schools report a significant decline in the number of students opting to study religious studies? The reason given is that it is not included in the E-bac. This year, will he at least give thought to whether, in the humanities, there could be a choice of two out of three subjects—geography, history and religious studies? If religious studies is not included in the E-bac, it will be increasingly marginalised.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. He is a very effective spokesman for the Church of England, and indeed for the place of faith in the nation's life. However, the data suggest that the number of people taking religious studies at GCSE is rising. It was up 17.6% to 222,000 in the last set of figures that we have, overtaking history and geography.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State say whether he, his officials or his advisers are using private e-mail accounts in assessing the impact of the baccalaureate? Does he accept the Information Commissioner's view that private e-mail accounts that are used to talk about Government policy could be the subject of freedom of information requests?

Michael Gove: I admire the elegance with which the hon. Gentleman manages to insinuate into his question a matter that is dramatically different from issues relating to the English baccalaureate. All Government business in the Department for Education is at all times conducted with extreme propriety.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): In consideration of the impact of the English baccalaureate, will the Secretary of State discuss with Ofsted how it should evaluate schools' performance to ensure that work on vocational and other subjects is taken into account?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The English baccalaureate is a powerful nudge to encourage take-up in the sorts of subjects that lead students to be able to progress to good universities and great jobs, but it is important that Ofsted applies a nuanced measurement when it judges how schools are performing, and schools that do superbly in vocational, technical, cultural and other areas should expect Ofsted to applaud them as well.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will have seen that on Thursday the Skills Commission launched a report on the training of technicians. We desperately need more technicians, and there is great fear that the changes in the curriculum will squeeze out design and technology, which is, for many students, often the bridge to science, technology, engineering and maths subjects.

Michael Gove: That is a very fair point, and design and technology has many powerful champions, including the hon. Gentleman, but I would emphasise that the single most important thing that we can do if we are to ensure a generation of not just technicians but manufacturing leaders in future is make sure that we perform better in mathematics and that there are more students studying physics and chemistry. They are the key to success, and one of the reasons why the English baccalaureate has been so successful is that it has encouraged students to study those essential subjects.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there have always been core subjects and option subjects, and that the value of the E-bac is in signalling the most widely valued core subjects without precluding option subjects? That advice is of most value to the most disadvantaged in our society.

Michael Gove: That is a typically acute point from my hon. Friend. The subjects in the E-bac bear a close resemblance to the sorts of subjects in an Arnoldian vision of liberal education but, more than that, they are the subjects that modern universities and 21st-century employers increasingly demand. One of the problems that we have had in the past is that too few students from poorer areas have been able to access and benefit from great subject-teaching in those disciplines.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The first university technical college in the country, the JCB academy, achieved 0% this year in the Secretary of State's misleadingly titled English baccalaureate. I presume from what he has just said that he regards that as a failure, or are the rumours true and is he just distancing himself now from his Schools Minister's pet policy?

Michael Gove: I was asked last week by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) about the JCB academy, and by his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), about the JCB academy, so let me repeat once again for the slower learners at the back of the class: I applaud the amazing achievements of the JCB academy. The English baccalaureate is just one measure of excellence and there are many others. As I underlined last week, the success of the university technical college—a school whose success was made possible by a Conservative party donor and whose success is burnished by Conservative party policies—is a success that I am happy to trumpet from any platform.

PGCE Bursary

7. **Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effects of the withdrawal of bursary funding on PGCE students who commenced their courses in September. [74424]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Tim Loughton): All PGCE students can apply for the same student support as undergraduate students, including maintenance loans and means-tested grants. As an additional recruitment incentive, the Department pays bursaries. These are adjusted regularly according to the size of the pool of potential teachers and the demand from schools for new teachers. For certain subjects we have therefore removed the bursaries for 2011-12. Other subjects, including maths, foreign languages and sciences, attract bursaries of up to £9,000.

Caroline Nokes: Can the Minister tell the House how the changes to the bursaries have affected recruitment to initial teacher training courses this year?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is right. We will have recruitment numbers to courses in November, when the Training and Development Agency for Schools has completed its census of training providers. That will include the figures for initial teacher training, but it looks as though we will have high numbers of quality applicants in all subjects. The latest evidence suggests that this will be another strong year for recruitment, and that we are on course for the best year ever in the recruitment of physics and chemistry trainees in particular.

SEN Support

8. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What progress he has made on extending support for children with special educational needs. [74425]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Sarah Teather): We have finished consultation on our Green Paper, "Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability". Twenty pathfinders, covering 31 local authority areas, are under way and will be testing proposals set out in the Green Paper. We will publish details of how we will respond to the consultation and take forward the development of special educational needs and disability provision by the end of the year.

Richard Graham: Some of the experiences of my constituents suggest that adopted children are especially vulnerable to developing special educational needs as a result of trauma. Would the Minister consider extending support to adoptive parents, especially information and advice, so that any latent special educational needs of adopted children can be identified as early as possible?

Sarah Teather: The critical issue is that children in care have particularly high levels of special educational needs. We need to get better at picking up those needs at an early stage and putting in place the right kind of care and support package for those children so that their needs are not latent and not picked up by the time the children are being put up for adoption. I announced in September which areas would begin the pathfinders. Some of those local authorities will be looking specifically at how they can improve that process of assessment for children in care. I hope that will make significant differences as we begin to learn the results of that for families who adopt a child.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): The Minister touched on the issue of children in care with special needs. Many children with special needs are those living in situations of domestic violence. The Minister's colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), recently sent a foreword to support Operation Encompass, which is based in Plymouth. Will the Minister agree to meet those involved, such as Police Sergeant Carney Howarth, and teachers to hear first hand how they are supporting vulnerable young people and how they quickly identify those whose education could be adversely affected by domestic violence, leading to special needs?

Sarah Teather: I am sure that I or my colleague, depending who is most appropriate, will be happy to meet people to discuss that matter.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am pleased that the Minister seems to be aware that looked-after children are nine times more likely than their peers to have special educational needs, yet while the number of children in care is increasing, support for special educational needs is decreasing. A recent report from Action for Children suggests that the impact of Government cuts on children and families will mean even more children being at risk of neglect and taken into care. There is no time to waste. What action will the Minister take now to reverse these worrying trends?

Sarah Teather: I welcome the hon. Lady to the Front Bench and look forward to working with her on these issues. I know that she has taken a particular interest in looked-after children and children in care. We have made it clear to local authorities that the early intervention grant should be spent on early intervention. We know that it is difficult for local authorities at the moment, just as it is difficult for the Government. We are all having to make difficult decisions, but I think that local authorities are the right people to make those decisions. In areas that are beginning pathfinder work, we will be able to test exactly how we can ensure that we support children with special educational needs better in a range of settings.

University Technical Colleges

9. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): How many university technical colleges he expects to open in 2012. [74426]

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): We now have 16 new university technical colleges approved, up to half of which may open in September 2012.

Philip Davies: May I tell the Secretary of State how much I support the introduction of UTCs, but will he guarantee that they will not be delayed by any unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape and that he will ensure that the process is not frustrated and slowed down by officials in his Department?

Michael Gove: When it comes to dealing with bureaucracy and red tape, the officials in my Department are allies. They are terrible, swift swords cutting through the bureaucracy that has so far held this country back.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): This country is desperately short of skills in science, engineering and technology and far too few girls and women study those subjects. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that at least 50% of the pupils who will go to UTCs are female?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and know that she has recently completed a report on some of the barriers to young women taking advantage of the opportunities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. A new UTC is opening in Sheffield and I hope to be able to work with her to ensure that it generates enthusiasm among boys and girls in Sheffield and across South Yorkshire for the superb education it will offer.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): The Secretary of State will perhaps be aware of recent correspondence I sent to his ministerial team about the possibility of opening a UTC in Newton Abbot. Has he had an opportunity to consider the proposal, which would transform our local economy, and would one of his team be prepared to meet me to discuss it?

Michael Gove: One of my team will be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend—I imagine my colleagues will be fighting to see her. Plymouth is already benefitting from a new UTC, but there is no reason why other equally beautiful parts of Devon should not also benefit.

Sure Start (Finance)

10. **Mr Adrian Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of reductions in the budgets for Sure Start children's centres in the financial year (a) 2010-11 and (b) 2011-12. [74427]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Sarah Teather): There was no reduction in revenue funding for Sure Start children's centres in 2010-11. From April 2011, funding for children's centres is included within the early intervention grant. It is for local authorities to decide how to use that funding, taking account of their statutory duties and local needs.

Mr Bailey: I thank the Minister for her reply. The changes to the funding streams for Sure Start amount to a slashing of expenditure of around 22% nationally and 25% in my local authority of Sandwell, and the removal of the ring-fencing condition gives local authorities the opportunity to plug their gaps in other services with Sure Start funding. Will the Minister undertake to conduct a full assessment and monitor the impact of those cuts on Sure Start centres in future?

Sarah Teather: The Government continue to monitor what is happening on the ground. We have made sure that enough money is available in the early intervention grant for a network of children's centres. Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide sufficient children's centres and to consult before opening, closing or significantly changing those services. We want to ensure that those are not just empty buildings and that they are providing high-quality services that are focused on outcomes that really matter, which is why I have recently announced the start of payment-by-results trials, which will focus much better on outcomes, and why we are consulting on a new core purpose, which will also focus on outcomes. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree that it is the outcomes that matter.

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I support Sure Start centres, and I know that Her Majesty's Government do and always have done. Will the Minister confirm that, despite the Opposition's apocalyptic warnings, there are broadly the same number of Sure Start centres now as there were when the coalition came into power?

Sarah Teather: There is information available on directgov, and it links to what information we have about the children's centres that are available in local authority areas. From speaking to local authorities, I certainly know, as I said in my answer just a few minutes ago, that on the whole good local authorities, which do have to make difficult decisions, are merging back-office functions and management functions to make sure that they can focus on outcomes—the point that I just made, and which I think every Member would want.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): As the Minister does not have a clue about the actual impact on the ground of her decision to cut Sure Start funding—cutting it by more than a fifth and removing the ring fence—I decided to find out for myself, and I will let her know what I have found: 83% of councils are cutting their funding this year; 89% of councils are cutting it next year; they are being forced to lay off qualified teachers; and in some areas children's centres are actually closing. Given those findings, is she prepared to rethink her decisions and act to ensure that families are given the support that they need in the foundation years?

Sarah Teather: I believe I read in the press that the hon. Lady said that 47 children's centres would close, and it would be helpful if she sent me that information. I suspect that not all local authorities replied to her, in just the same way as not all local authorities replied to us. She could do much to chivvy her local authorities to reply, because we could then make absolutely sure that the information on directgov was completely accurate. I am not sure that I have an awful lot more to add to the point that I have already made clear: the money is available in the early intervention grant, and we are making it clear to local authorities that Sure Start children's centres are a priority. Indeed, some of her colleagues complained that I had placed a moral ring fence—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just point out that we have a lot to get through? We must press on.

Faith Schools

11. **Patrick Mercer** (Newark) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the funding of faith schools; and if he will make a statement. [74428]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Tim Loughton): No separate assessment has been made of faith school funding. The only distinction in funding between faith schools and other maintained schools and academies is in the contribution to capital-funded projects made by voluntary-aided schools.

Patrick Mercer: I am grateful for the Minister's reply. I am sure that he will join me in congratulating the al-Karam Muslim school in Eaton in my constituency on its extraordinary achievement. Will he be kind enough to give me an idea of what we might do further to help not just that school, but the Everyday Champions school in Newark?

Tim Loughton: I am delighted to pass on my good wishes to those schools that have done well in my hon. Friend's constituency. It contains no fewer than 17 schools with a religious character which have done well. I am aware that the Everyday Champions organisation applied for a free school but was unsuccessful, and I think that he has been copied in on the reasons why, but we will continue to encourage those faith schools that offer a particularly excellent education for the many children whom they now look after.

Music

12. **Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): What plans he has for the future of music education in schools. [74429]

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): We will shortly publish a national plan for music education, which will reform the delivery and funding of music education. It will ensure that pupils have opportunities to learn an instrument, to sing and to play in ensembles.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. He will be aware of Plato's theory of education, which says that musical training is one of the most important instruments in education. Is he aware also of the Institute of Education research which found that one in nine primary schools does not have a piano? Will he take steps to ensure that all primary schools have a musical co-ordinator and, more importantly, a piano?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for making those points. She is absolutely right that the wider provision not just of trained music teachers, but of musical instruments will ensure not just that more children have access to the greatest of all art forms, but that more children as a result do better in every other subject.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State is aware of the excellent Blackpool Music Service, which has won national awards for bringing music provision to children who would otherwise not be able to afford it. As we debate the role of local education authorities alongside the new aims of academies, does he not agree that such co-ordination is a role that local authorities can still play, adding value to the work of all schools in their local area?

Michael Gove: That is a typically acute point by my hon. Friend; he is absolutely right. In many cases, though not all, county music services do a superb job. One of the reforms that will be central to our national music plan is a way of making sure that the best county music services can do more while those that are weaker can have the service they provide supplanted by someone who is in a better position to raise standards for all children.

British Sign Language

13. **Tessa Munt** (Wells) (LD): What his policy is on the inclusion of British sign language as a modern foreign language option at GCSE. [74430]

The Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (Mr John Hayes): I understand that an awarding organisation is considering whether to develop and pilot a GCSE in British sign language. It will be for the independent regulator, Ofqual, to consider whether any such qualification meets the appropriate criteria for being recognised as a foreign language GCSE.

Tessa Munt: I thank the Minister for that answer. As he knows, I have very strong feelings about British sign language, which offers an opportunity for people of all ages to develop their vocabulary and to expand their communication skills, and particularly for young people to develop speech and language skills, including their comprehension. It breaks down barriers for everybody, including those with significant learning disabilities. Action on Hearing Loss runs a campaign called "Read my lips", which seeks recognition for lip-reading as an essential skill, not a leisure skill, as it is classified at the moment, and proposes that classes should be free for those with hearing loss and those who have family members—

Mr Speaker: Will the hon. Lady ask the question?

Tessa Munt: I will indeed, Sir. Will the Minister please update me on progress on reclassifying lip-reading as an essential skill?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady has a long-standing interest in this subject, as I do, given my own hearing loss and my long-standing similar interest in disability issues more generally. I see British sign language as a bridge to learning and a key aid to communication, and I entirely agree that we need to look at ways to support it and to ensure that people old and young can learn to sign. There is an issue about whether we treat it in the way that the hon. Lady suggests, but I am more than happy to meet her to discuss this and see whether we can take it further.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Some deaf children have been successful in learning foreign languages, but while deaf children are behind all children as an average, they do particularly poorly in languages. Given that, and with the Government wanting foreign languages to play a greater part, what plans do they have to ensure that deaf children do not fall further behind?

Mr Hayes: I have already had meetings with the Royal National Institute for Deaf People on the subject of signing, and, as I said, I am happy to meet the hon. Member for Wells (Tessa Munt) on the subject. However, I am not absolutely sure that treating BSL as a foreign language, as the original question suggested, is the best way forward. BSL is a preferred language of many deaf people in the UK, rather than a language of a different nation or culture. Some good qualifications are already in place, but I take the point that we need to examine whether they are effective in achieving the kind of results for deaf children that they deserve so that they can fulfil their potential.

Schools and Employers

14. **Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage links between schools and employers; and if he will make a statement. [74432]

The Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (Mr John Hayes): Increasing schools' autonomy is central to our mission. Of course the Government take business very seriously and understand the importance of the relationship between business and education. It is therefore absolutely right that local businesses cement links with schools. It is not for me to dictate what those links should be; that will depend on local circumstances. Organisations such as the chambers of commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses, in which my hon. Friend plays a distinguished part, are best placed to make those judgments.

Mr Jones: I thank the Minister for his response. Over the past seven years, we have seen a trend of rising youth unemployment, and we are now also starting to see a real skills gap in engineering and manufacturing. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are truly to rebalance our economy and reduce youth unemployment, we must, in partnership with our world-class manufacturing companies, put in place a strategy to energise and promote the future of engineering and manufacturing within our schools?

Mr Hayes: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a point that is both salient and persuasive. The Government need no persuading, however, that STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—matters. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke earlier of our work with university technical colleges, which were originally devised by Rab Butler, a great Education Secretary, and driven by the noble Lord Baker, who was another. We have delivering that policy a third great Education Secretary in the making, who is sitting next to me.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Was any assessment undertaken of the approach taken by business education partnerships? In my area, the Humber, we had an excellent business education partnership, and most of the business leaders who sat on it are distraught that its funding was withdrawn without any notice at all.

Mr Hayes: As I said, such things are best dealt with locally, but make no mistake: this Government regard skills as at the top of the political agenda. If we are to equip businesses with what they need and allow people to fulfil their potential, we must, once and for all, give those with practical, technical tastes and talents their place in the sun, their chance of glittering prizes.

Mr Rob Wilson (Reading East) (Con): I confirm for my hon. Friend that university technical colleges are providing a fantastic platform for bringing employers and schools together. Reading's new UTC is supported by Microsoft, BT and many other leading companies. Considering that so many important companies are stepping up to these important responsibilities, is he not disappointed by the reaction of the teaching unions and some Labour Members?

Mr Hayes: I should declare an interest as an associate member of a teaching union.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Which one?

Mr Hayes: The Association of Teachers and Lecturers. It is absolutely essential that teachers, businesses and learners combine to best effect to ensure that we equip our young people, and our country, with the skills that they need to prosper.

Mr Speaker: We are all greatly enlightened by the Minister of State's observations.

IT (Primary Schoolchildren)

15. **Alun Michael** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he plans to take to promote the involvement of primary schoolchildren in IT and internet-related activities. [74433]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): Information and communications technology in the national curriculum will be considered as part of the national curriculum review. The effective use of technology can support good teaching and raise educational standards, but primary schools are best placed to make decisions on how to use technology to meet the needs of their pupils.

Alun Michael: But enthusiasm and encouragement are also important. With your support and encouragement, Mr Speaker, MPs across all parties have encouraged their local primary schools to engage with the "Make IT happy" competition, organised by the Parliamentary Information Technology Committee, which I have the honour to chair. Will the Minister join me in urging schools to enter that competition, because it is good for pupils, good for Parliament and good for the early engagement of children with issues that are important to our economy?

Mr Gibb: I am happy to do so, and I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the initiative. Already, about 90% of primary school pupils say that teachers help them understand how to use technology. That is a great success story, and I wish his project every success.

Teaching Standards

16. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What plans he has to improve the quality of teaching. [74434]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): Nothing has more impact on a child's achievement than the quality of the teaching that they receive. We are raising the bar for new teachers, supporting existing teachers to improve and making it easier for head teachers to tackle underperformance among teachers who cannot meet the required standards.

Mark Menzies: I thank the Minister for his answer, but exactly how will he raise the bar to ensure that we get the best possible new entrants into the teaching profession?

Mr Gibb: We are offering strong financial incentives to the best trainees, and are consulting on issuing bursaries of up to £20,000 to the best trainees in priority subjects. We are also expanding and doubling the successful Teach First programme and introducing trips for teachers to bring the skills of service leavers into schools. We will ensure that all trainees have a good understanding of maths and English, by requiring them to take tests prior to entering initial teacher training. We are reviewing the qualified teacher status standards under the excellent chairmanship of Sally Coates, the principal of Burlington Danes academy. I could go on, Mr Speaker, but I will stop there.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does the Minister think that lessening teachers' employment protection and worsening their terms and conditions will improve or diminish teachers' morale?

Mr Gibb: That is not our policy. Teachers in academies are generally paid more. What we are doing is reviewing the performance management regulations to make it easier for head teachers to tackle underperformance in our schools and to bring the employment regulations in schools in line with employment practices in other professions and industries.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister feel, as I do, that the quality of teaching is adversely affected by the recently reported high number of false complaints made by children against teachers? If so, what sort of protection can the Government give innocent teachers who are put in that situation?

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue. For a teacher to have an accusation made against them by a pupil, which ultimately turns out to be false, can have a devastating impact on not only their career but their private life. We are therefore determined to do all we can to protect teachers, to enable them to maintain discipline and improve behaviour in our schools. That is why the Education Bill, which is currently going through another place, has a provision giving school teachers anonymity in the reporting of such accusations in the press.

In-service Training

17. **Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks) (Con): Whether academies are able to move in-service training days to dates outside term time. [74435]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Tim Loughton): Academies are able to allocate time for teachers' learning and development, including training days, at the most suitable time for the academy and its staff, including outside an academy's published term time.

Michael Fallon: Given the inconvenience to some parents when in-service training days are simply tacked on to the half-term holiday, does my hon. Friend agree that the evolution of academies and free schools provides an opportunity to see how we can better match the training needs of teachers to the school year?

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Of course, one advantage of academies is the flexibility that they can offer in training their teaching staff. Of course, that is also an advantage for the pupils and their parents, who may have to make arrangements for child care when training days are taken during term time. That flexibility is available to academies, and I hope that it will benefit everybody.

Topical Questions

T1. [74444] **Mr Douglas Carswell** (Clacton) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): I was delighted that last Friday, Her Majesty's new chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, was appointed. I am confident that under his leadership, Ofsted will continue to do its fantastic work in driving up standards in state education. May I take this opportunity to pay an appropriate debt of gratitude to his two predecessors, his acting predecessor Miriam Rosen and, of course, Christine Gilbert, who did such a distinguished job as Her Majesty's chief inspector?

Mr Carswell: Many mums and dads in my part of Essex would like to see local free schools, but for all their enthusiasm there are still too many obstacles and obstructions. What will the Government do to make it easier to establish free schools? Will they perhaps allow specialist charities and businesses to do so? May I bring a delegation of mums and dads to discuss with officials how it can be done?

Michael Gove: We will do everything possible to support the establishment of free schools, but there is one barrier that I can do nothing about—the confusion on the Labour party Benches. Just last Friday, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) said that he would back the setting up of free schools, but yesterday he said on Sky television that the Labour party opposed the free schools policy. That U-turn within 72 hours leaves parents and teachers in a quandary, which is why so many of them are saying, "Thank heavens it's a coalition Government in power rather than Labour!"

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): May I first join the Secretary of State in welcoming the appointment of Sir Michael Wilshaw, who has a fine track record, and in thanking Miriam Rosen and Christine Gilbert for their service?

May I take the Secretary of State back to my earlier exchange with the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb)? I welcome the increase in the number of young people taking history, geography and modern foreign languages, but schools are getting very mixed messages about the E-bac. Will he answer the question that I put to his colleague? Will he look to create a technical baccalaureate, as proposed by many including his noble Friend Lord Baker? If he does not, the UTCs and others will simply be frozen out of the improvements to education that he says he wants to deliver.

Michael Gove: It is a curious type of freezing out that has seen the number of UTCs increase by 800% as a result of the changes that we have made. If we are going to talk about freezing out and frostiness, what about the cold shoulder that the hon. Gentleman is turning to the parents and teachers who want to set up free schools everywhere? If we are talking about a chilling effect, what about the chilling effect on all those who believe in education reform, who will have seen his brave efforts to drag the Labour party into the 21st century, only to see him dragged back within 72 hours? We detect the cold and pulsate hand of his leader dragging him back from a posture of reform to one of reaction.

T2. [74445] **Paul Uppal** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): Recently, at the WorldSkills competition in London, Britain came fifth out of 49 countries that were entered, above Germany, France and the USA. However, we still face a skills gap, and in some areas of the country, such as the area just north of Wolverhampton where there are new developments involving, for example, Jaguar and Land Rover, worries are high that jobs will not go to local graduates. What measures are in place to ensure that school leavers are in a position to fulfil the needs of business and manufacturing in the 21st century?

The Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (Mr John Hayes): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that WorldSkills was a triumph. In an event involving 1,000 competitors from 52 countries and more than 40 skills, Britain achieved its best ever result. It is our commitment to excellence and our belief in rigour that combines our approach to academic learning and vocational learning. Whether it is Pliny or plumbing, or Plutarch or plastering, we believe in excellence, excellence, excellence.

T6. [74449] **Steve Rotheram** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Labour Members believe that the E-bac might be for some, but certainly not for all. Some people are better suited to more vocational courses rather than purely academic routes. Why does the Secretary of State not believe in parity of esteem?

Michael Gove: I certainly do believe in parity of esteem. In particular, I think that we should esteem working-class students in the same way that we esteem those from other backgrounds. The fact that under the previous Government working-class students were too often denied the opportunity to study the academic subjects that would lead them to university is a contributory factor in the freezing of social mobility over the course of the past 15 years. A fatal flaw in this country's approach to education is that we automatically assume that just because children come from poorer backgrounds, they cannot succeed academically. At last, under this coalition Government, that unhappy prejudice is being uprooted from the education system.

T4. [74447] **Mr David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend send a message to Enfield council—two days ago, such a message would have been endorsed by my predecessor, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—which has a policy of opposing free schools despite a shortage of primary school places, and which decided last week to sell off the old town hall rather than offer it up for a free school?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. Just last Thursday, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby visited an outstanding free school in Enfield. I would have hoped that that would have been a powerful signal to the reactionary elements within the Enfield Labour party that they should support education reform in the interests of the poorest rather than stand against it. However, I am afraid that his words on Sky television will have given heart to those reactionary elements rather than put them in their place. He has a direct responsibility to reassure reformers that he is on their side.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is quite enough. Could I just remind the Secretary of State—I know that he tends to make this mistake—that he is not today at the Oxford Union making a speech, but answering questions in the Chamber of the House of Commons? He does so brilliantly, but from now on he will do so more briefly. That is the end of it.

T9. [74452] **Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Lab): Charities play an increasingly important role in education—indeed, the Secretary of State has been involved in a variety of charities. Can he assure the House that he took all appropriate steps to ensure that Atlantic Bridge did not abuse its charitable status?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I was proud to play my part in ensuring that the relationship between this country and the United States of America was strengthened, and I will always stand in favour of the Atlantic alliance. As a member of the advisory board of Atlantic Bridge, I took the opportunity, as I will on all platforms, to say that I believe—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State will resume his seat. He will answer questions on matters for which he is responsible, not on other matters. I have made the position clear, and no dilation from the Secretary of State is required.

T5. [74448] **Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that so far two secondary schools in my constituency have become academies, and that a further two are applying to do so.

However, one of those schools has run into problems because it runs a nursery. Rawlins college tells me that it has received unclear advice from his Department on the best way for the nursery to be constituted, which must be sorted before the college can become an academy. Will he agree to assist me in finding the most effective solution to this problem, so that Rawlins can hit its preferred conversion date of 1 November?

Michael Gove: I shall do everything in my power.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the Secretary of State.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I have been contacted by parents and teachers about the difficulties of online registration for school milk. There have been reductions in the past year of between a quarter and a third in some schools in Ashfield. Are Ministers aware of that situation, is it a national trend, and what can they do about it?

Michael Gove: I am now aware of that situation. I do not know whether it is a national trend. Of course, every child deserves the opportunity to have school milk.

T7. [74450] **Jessica Lee** (Erewash) (Con): In light of the recent UK adoption rate figures, will my hon. Friend set out what steps the Government are taking to continue to encourage prospective adopting parents to come forward to be assessed? Those in Erewash and throughout the UK could provide much-needed homes for looked-after children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Tim Loughton): My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and she knows that the Government are absolutely committed to improving the lot of looked-after children in this country and getting more of those for whom it is appropriate into adoption. We need to get the message across loud and clear that people who want to do the noble deed of coming forward and showing an interest in adoption should be welcomed with open arms at the town hall door and given every encouragement, rather than the "Don't call us, we'll call you" attitude that has prevailed in too many places up to now. We will make that change.

Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Further to that question, will the Minister update the House on plans to introduce savings accounts for looked-after children?

Tim Loughton: The right hon. Gentleman and I had a conversation on this matter recently when I was on my way from Leeds airport, and I hope to be able to update the House on it shortly, because we are committed to the scheme. Sorting out the practical details has been a complete nightmare, but we are now close to doing so and I hope that he will welcome the good news that will be coming soon.

T8. [74451] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): I am sure that the Education team will be delighted to hear that the highly acclaimed Manor Church of England school in my constituency has experienced a smooth transition to academy status. Now, however, it is moving into its second year as an academy, and it has raised concerns about the delayed allocation of its annual budget. Is the Secretary of State aware of these issues, and will he be addressing them before the next round of budget allocations?

Michael Gove: I am very aware of these issues, and that is one of the reasons we are consulting on replacing the system of funding that we inherited from the previous Government.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Many 16 to 18-year-olds choose to study at a college rather than in a school sixth form, and they are therefore not eligible for free school meals. How and when are the Government going to address that anomaly?

Michael Gove: I am familiar with that anomaly; it is a situation we inherited from the previous Government. We are seeking to ensure that funding is equalised between colleges and school sixth forms.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): Following the very popular announcement that there is to be a university technical college on the Southwark college site in Bermondsey, may I encourage the Secretary of State to complete the set by allowing a college, a UTC and a secondary school all to be on the same campus, given the breadth of experience that many youngsters in an inner-city seat such as mine are really looking forward to?

Michael Gove: I will do everything I can. How lucky Southwark is to have such an outstanding MP, and what a pity it is that the local authority has taken a grudging response to new school provision.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Ministers will have been horrified to see that the UK Border Agency is still routinely detaining children, and that it does not know where, for how long or how many there are. Will the Minister responsible for safeguarding call on her colleagues urgently to investigate this matter, not only to meet the coalition's pledge but to ensure that the Government whom she represents are not actively putting children at risk?

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Sarah Teather): The hon. Lady will be aware that we have a commitment to abolish detention—[HON. MEMBERS: "By last Christmas."] We have already set up the panel, and that is now beginning. I am aware of the article that the hon. Lady mentioned, and the reports that have appeared in the press. This is a matter of concern to me as well.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): In Calderdale, 15% of all schools have now converted to academy status, but that is unique in our region, particularly because of the disinformation that is being peddled on the subject. Will the Secretary of State consider increasing the amount of communication to schools on conversion to academy status to help to dispel many of the myths that are being peddled?

Michael Gove: I will certainly do everything in my power. We could of course be helped by the Labour party, and not least by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, who says that he is "relaxed" about an enormous expansion of academies. Let us hope that the next time he has an opportunity to share his views with us, he will be enthused about this.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I was very pleased that the Government continued the capital funding for myplace, and the Fuse has now opened in my constituency, but we are very concerned about revenue funding to ensure that we are not simply left with a beautiful empty building. Can the Government offer any advice or assistance that would help to make a difference to some of the most disadvantaged young people in my community?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is right to highlight myplace, and I was delighted that we were able to find £124 million for the building of some 63 myplace centres. I want them to be the hub of communities up and down the country. If there are particular problems with her myplace, she should speak to the Big Lottery Fund, which manages the scheme on our behalf. We will be putting forward our policy in "Positive for Youth" later in the autumn, which will set out how we can bring in new, mixed sources of revenue that I hope will help myplace centres and other youth provision.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that his Department has received a bid from Patchway community college in my constituency for investment under the Government's priority schools building programme. Given that the school was overlooked by the previous Government's Building Schools for the Future programme, will he look seriously at Patchway's deserving bid? I must tell the House that one of my children still goes to that school.

Michael Gove: A beautifully tailored bid from my hon. Friend! We will look as favourably as we can on all schools that were overlooked by the previous Government's BSF programme.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Association of Colleges has surveyed its members and found a fall in recruitment to colleges this autumn. What steps is the Secretary of State putting in place to monitor and evaluate the effect on student recruitment, retention and achievement of his decision to scrap the education maintenance allowance?

Michael Gove: I was interested to look at the Association of Colleges survey, which showed that an equal number of colleges were, in fact, attracting more students. The truth is that there is increased competition among colleges to attract students, with strong colleges, like the one of which the hon. Gentleman used to be the principal, doing a fantastic job, but with weaker colleges—of which, sadly, there are still one or two—having to up their game.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Last week, the governing body of the historic Prince Henry grammar school, which is a comprehensive school in Otley, voted by 10 to nine to become an academy, although one governor, who had made it clear that she was going to vote against it, was away. Regardless of that decision, does the Secretary of State understand the concern that such an important decision has been taken on such a close vote?

Michael Gove: When schools become academies, it is important that governors are clear about the advantages and the issues. It is always difficult, when the vote is narrow, to discern what any individual who was not there, having heard all the arguments, might have done when the decision was taken. I would be happy to discuss the pros and cons of this case with my hon. Friend. If the school does become an academy, I am sure it will flourish as one, but if it chooses to keep its current status, I am sure it will benefit as well.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): How many children do not have access to a breakfast club or an after-school club place because of the removal of extended school funding?

Tim Loughton: I was delighted to attend in Leeds recently the Magic Breakfast charity, which has done fantastic work. It is a social enterprise that has worked its brilliant magic on schools up and down the country to make sure that kids get a healthy breakfast. We want to see more of that through organisations such as Magic Breakfast. I would hope that the hon. Lady supported such organisations.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): There is a strong feeling in Bromley, which is in the vanguard of the academies movement, that the proposed formula for the top-slicing of LACSEG—local authority central spend equivalent grant—unfairly penalises very efficient local authorities. Will the Secretary of State agree to a meeting to discuss this concern?

Michael Gove: Strong feelings in Bromley always weigh with me. It is the case that the approach to LACSEG needs reform, and we are consulting on it. I expect that, as ever, voices from Bromley will be among the most persuasive.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State and his colleagues for those brilliant and brief replies over the last few minutes, which meant that I was able to accommodate more colleagues than would otherwise have been possible.

Speaker's Statement

3.32 pm

Mr Speaker: I have a statement to make. Following it, I will not take questions or points of order.

In July, I instituted an independent review of security arrangements, following the attack on Rupert Murdoch while he was a witness before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I have now received a report on the matter and have had an opportunity to consider its findings.

The review found that at the time of the attack none of the security staff in the room was in a position to be able to reach the assailant before he got to Mr Murdoch. Those present commented upon the chaotic nature of scenes inside and outside the Committee Room following the incident. The inadequate security in the room was the result of a serious failure of planning for this event, based upon the wrong assessment of risk. These and other deficiencies should have been recognised and rectified in advance. They were not.

Public access to Committee sessions is of fundamental importance and must be protected. Not only is it a precious freedom, but it provides a valuable opportunity for engagement between this House and the people it serves. Equally important is our duty to protect the personal safety of witnesses appearing before our Committees and to ensure the effective operation of these Committees. Clearly, the personal safety of all involved—witnesses, Members, staff and the public—must be the guiding principle for those charged with security.

The review makes a number of practical recommendations. All of those relating only to this House I have accepted in full, and all of them either have been, or are in the process of being, implemented. In future, risk assessments for the most high-risk events will be reviewed, robustly scrutinised and formally approved by the most senior security official in the House. There will be enhanced physical security arrangements in Committee Rooms for high-risk events, and a regime has already begun to prevent visitors from bringing bags into a meeting room for such an event.

There is a recommendation that the establishment of a post of director of security be reconsidered. I will begin discussions—including with my counterpart in the House of Lords, the Lord Speaker—about whether that merits further attention, and could complement existing roles.

I have placed copies of the recommendations, and of an update on progress in giving effect to them, in the Library, the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

The safety of those participating in, or visiting, public Committee hearings must not be compromised, and I will do everything I can to ensure that it is not.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: As I have just explained, I am not taking points of order on this matter.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is on a different subject.

Mr Speaker: I have another statement to make. If Members will hold their horses, they will have their opportunity.

I wish to tell the House about implementation of the resolutions agreed on Thursday 13 October on electronic devices and e-tabling of questions for written answer.

The House agreed to allow the use of hand-held electronic devices, but not laptops, in the Chamber,

> "provided that they are silent and used in a way that does not impair decorum",

and to allow Members to refer to such devices in making speeches

> "in place of paper speaking notes".—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 555.]

The occupants of the Chair will seek to enforce the resolution as from today, but in practice it is up to individual Members to give effect to the will of the House by complying with the resolution. I therefore ask colleagues for their co-operation in this matter. Implementation of the resolution in Committees is a matter for the Liaison Committee and the Panel of Chairs.

The House agreed to an experimental regime for a daily ration of five e-tabled questions for written answer and a 6.30 pm deadline for tabling such questions. This will have effect from the rise of the House on Friday 21 October, for an experimental period of three months. A detailed memorandum on its operation is available in the Table Office, it will be printed in the Order Paper, and it will be accessible on the intranet. A message will also be sent to all Members who are signed up for e-tabling. The Table Office will of course be happy to give further advice on the new experimental regime.

Points of Order

3.37 pm

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Things have certainly moved on since last Monday, when the then Defence Secretary made a statement to the House. There has been a great deal of comment, and reports in the press, about various individuals and United States-based companies that were apparently involved with the individual who described himself at the time as the adviser to the Defence Secretary.

In view of the undoubtedly serious matters and allegations involving the Ministry of Defence, will the House have an opportunity to hear a statement? We heard a statement last Monday, but we have not heard one since, and these are very serious allegations.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take it, and then respond to the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick).

Paul Flynn: During business questions last week, the House was reminded of the promise the present Prime Minister made shortly before the election that the most serious threat to the reputation of the House—after MPs' expenses—was the possibility of abuse of our procedures by big corporate lobbyists. Sadly, the Government have taken no action to ensure that some control is exercised over the affairs of lobbyists, and there is now abundant evidence that that is an urgent priority.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Have Ministers informed you that they will come to the House to make a statement on that report before releasing it to the media?

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think that the hon. Lady's point of order is on an unrelated matter.

Lisa Nandy *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: I am correct in my surmise. We shall therefore come on to the hon. Lady's point of order shortly—we will save her up. First, I shall respond to the earlier point of order and the subsequent comments on it.

The short answer to the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), speaking from the Labour Front Bench, is no: I have not received any such notification. My response to the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) is that I have, of course, noted what he has told me and the House this afternoon, but, as he will know, responsibility for deciding to make statements, and then for making them, lies with Ministers. It is a matter of calculation or good fortune that as the hon. Gentleman was raising his point of order with me he was in the presence of the Leader of the House, who is sitting on the Treasury Bench. The comments that have been made will therefore have been heard, and I feel sure that if as a result of the publication of documents, or because decisions have been reached, a Minister wishes to make a statement, he or she will do so. Finally, I note what the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) has said, and others will also have done so.

Lisa Nandy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following last week's Westminster Hall debate on disabled access to public transport, I seek your advice on the treatment of visitors in wheelchairs to this place. This weekend, I received a number of complaints from people who missed the start of the debate because, despite stating their destination very clearly on arrival, they were directed to another Committee Room where a lobby meeting held by employees of Remploy was taking place. They, and others, were unable to fit into Westminster Hall. The majority of the chairs had not been removed because if they had been left in the corridor it might have disrupted a later debate. Our office gave notice that some visitors in wheelchairs were expected, but it does not seem right that people with disabilities should be required to give notice to come to this place when others are not. I have the greatest respect for the staff in this House and I do not attribute responsibility to any individual, but it seems that we have, collectively on this occasion, fallen far short of the standards that the 12 million people in this country with disabilities should be able to expect from their elected representatives. I therefore ask that you urgently investigate this matter, Mr Speaker, and ensure that such situations never arise again.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for providing me with notice of her intended point of order, I am grateful to her for what she said and I am grateful for the manner in which she said it. I attach the greatest importance to all our proceedings being accessible to everyone, without discrimination. The hon. Lady relates to me a sequence of events with which until a short while ago I was entirely unfamiliar. The best I can say to her and the House is that I will inquire into the matters she raises, reporting back as necessary to her and the House. I hope that is helpful.

Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund

3.43 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): I beg to move,

That this House reasserts its view that the salaries, pensions and expenses scheme for hon. Members ought to be determined independently of this House; accordingly invites the Leader of the House to make an order commencing those provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 which transfer responsibility for the pensions of hon. Members to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA); supports the approach to public service pension reform set out in the Final Report of the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission chaired by Lord Hutton of Furness; believes that IPSA should introduce, by 2015, a new pension scheme for hon. Members which is informed by the Commission's findings and their subsequent application to other public service pension schemes; recognises the case for an increase in pension contributions made in Lord Hutton's interim report; and accordingly invites IPSA to increase contribution rates for hon. Members from 1 April 2012 in line with changes in pension contribution rates for other public service schemes.

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope).

Sir George Young: Should the House agree to this motion, we will have completed the transition to a wholly independent system for setting and administering MPs' remuneration. The first and most pressing task was to establish a transparent new expenses scheme in time for the beginning of this Parliament. That was achieved, albeit not without some issues about the operation of the scheme, which have been aired on other occasions. Since May this year, responsibility for setting MPs' pay has also rested with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; under the relevant legislation, MPs will not vote on their own pay again. Today's debate on MPs' pensions represents the final piece of the jigsaw. Once the powers in relation to pensions have been transferred to IPSA, it will have responsibility for looking in the round at the whole remuneration package for Members of Parliament.

The motion before us should not come as a surprise to the House.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman says this is the last piece of the IPSA jigsaw. Is he satisfied that all the other pieces of the jigsaw are perfectly placed?

Sir George Young: I know that my hon. Friend is not so satisfied. He will know that a Committee of the House is looking into the legislation and that there is a committee that liaises between this House and IPSA. I think that the latter is aware of his views on the improvements that need to be made to the scheme. This motion relates not to the allowances that, I believe, are his preoccupation but to pensions.

Before we rose for the summer recess, I set out the Government's approach to hon. Members' pensions in a written ministerial statement, and I also published the motion we are debating. Should the House agree to support the motion, we will have protected the principle that MPs' remuneration should be independently assessed and determined and demonstrated to our constituents that we understand that Parliament must not be insulated from the fiscal circumstances affecting the rest of the country.

Mr John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Leader of the House said that we will never vote again on these matters. Does that mean that the House will not vote the money needed to pay these salaries? What will be done about the overall budget for the costs of government and Parliament, which I thought was of interest to the Government?

Sir George Young: The position is exactly as I said: under legislation passed by the House we will not vote on our own pay, which IPSA will determine independently. It will have the authority to do that and, without primary legislation, which the House would have to agree, its determination will be the last word.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May we get this clear? Some of us will be rather surprised to hear that we will never again vote on our salaries, because Ministers have told us that before but we have always been persuaded to vote again on them.

Sir George Young: Primary legislation precludes that. Were the Government to be minded to change that, they would have to persuade the House to reintroduce primary legislation overturning the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, which deals with IPSA, and the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, which have taken the matter out of our control, so there is no longer a parallel with the previous position.

Mr Redwood: I understand the narrow point about rates of pay, but my question is rather different: are the coalition Government still interested in the overall costs of Parliament and of MPs? Will we vote through the money, or will somebody else do that?

Sir George Young: It would be quite wrong to say that, in principle, our pay should be determined by IPSA but to try, by the back door, to circumscribe that decision by voting down the money it had determined should be paid as our salaries. That would not be an independent determination of our salaries.

Mr Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab) *rose—*

Sir George Young: I will give way to the chairman of the trustees.

Mr Donohoe: May I ask why the motion does exactly what the right hon. Gentleman is saying?

Sir George Young: I am not sure that I follow the hon. Gentleman. The motion transfers responsibility for determining MPs' pensions to IPSA and delivers a commitment made in the Parliamentary Standards Act and the CRAG Act, which I believe were passed without dissent in the previous Parliament.

Mr Donohoe: The second part of the motion does the exact opposite. The Leader of the House is trying to suggest that the independent IPSA should take on board what he proposes in the motion, which is that the contributions made by Members of Parliament should increase in line with those of people in the public sector.

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for clarifying his point. If he looks at the legislation, he will see that he and the House are statutory consultees for IPSA: if it wishes to make any changes to the scheme, it is obliged to consult the trustees, the Senior Salaries Review Body and anyone who might be affected, which includes all of us in this Chamber. We therefore have some locus in the consultation. The second part of the motion expresses a view on behalf of the House, which we are entitled to do under the legislation. It is right that Members make it clear to their constituents that they expect to be treated no differently from others in the public sector in the determination of their pension contributions.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir George Young: I would like to make a bit of progress before I give way.

It is accepted by Members on both sides of the House that the UK faces an unsustainable structural deficit that must be brought down. The Government have been forced, as any Government would be, to take difficult decisions across the public sector that have consequences for hon. Members. In March, the House agreed that Members' salaries should be frozen this year in line with the two-year pay freeze on public sector workers earning more than £21,000. After that debate, I commenced the relevant parts of the CRAG Act, formally transferring power to IPSA. I am sure that the chairman of the trustees and the House will recognise the comparison of that procedure and the one we are debating this afternoon—we are transferring responsibility while at the same time expressing a view.

Before the election, all parties publicly agreed that the current final salary terms of the parliamentary pension scheme should be brought to an end. However, as with other public service pension reform, changes will not be made retrospectively, nor will they have an impact on past benefits—an assurance that is as important to Members of the House as it is to those in other public sector schemes.

Looking ahead to a future scheme, the coalition agreement committed us to consult IPSA on moving from the final salary arrangements. In June last year, the Government established the independent public service pensions commission, chaired by Lord Hutton of Furness, to make recommendations on how to put public service pensions on a sustainable footing. Although the Hutton report did not include hon. Members within its scope of inquiry, it was immediately apparent that reform of the parliamentary pension scheme must be tackled in the light of the commission's findings and their subsequent application to other public service schemes. I do not believe that there is any case for our scheme being treated differently from other public service schemes. Indeed, there would be justifiable disbelief if it were.

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I accept that there is much to be said about our needing to set the public an example, particularly given the reforms we are trying to make to public sector schemes, but unlike many public sector schemes the parliamentary scheme is—or is near to being—fully funded and the contributions are rather larger. Will the Leader of the House go into more detail on the nature of the parliamentary scheme, which is slightly misunderstood in much of the press coverage?

Sir George Young: The contributions for those subscribing at one fortieth are indeed higher than those for many elsewhere in the public sector, but so are the benefits. The Exchequer contribution, at some 28%, is also substantially higher than for other public sector schemes. One needs to consider it in the round when one comes to a judgment about the appropriate treatment of the scheme.

Today's motion supports the approach to public service pension reform set out in the final report of the independent public service pensions commission.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Some of us strongly support the principle behind my right hon. Friend's motion, but our dilemma is that once again IPSA is acting as administrator and as the body that sets the rates—an arrangement that one does not often find anywhere else. If the committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) finds that there should be some division between the administration of our pay, pensions, allowances and so on and the setting of their rates, will my right hon. Friend reassure us that the motion, if passed, will not be the final word on the matter?

Sir George Young: The administration will be performed by the trustees; there is no change in that. The contribution rates and ultimately the shape of the scheme will be determined by IPSA, which will set the rules. The trustees will continue to administer the scheme, with some slight change in their membership to reflect IPSA's new involvement.

Mr Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give way?

Sir George Young: If I may, I will make a little more progress, and then I will give way.

The amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) suggests that the parts of the motion relating to the Hutton review should be removed. Its implication is that our scheme should not be treated the same as other public sector schemes, and I do not think our constituents would welcome such an interpretation.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On what basis does my right hon. Friend think that is a fair assessment of my amendment, which seeks to put in the motion the fact that IPSA is independent and should reach its own judgment? That is the effect of my amendment and I am sorry that my right hon. Friend seeks to misrepresent its purpose.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend's amendment would delete the following words:

> "and accordingly invites IPSA to increase contribution rates for hon. Members from 1 April 2012 in line with changes in pension contribution rates for other public service schemes."

[Sir George Young]

It is perfectly legitimate to say that one can deduce that he does not want Members' pension schemes to reflect other public service schemes.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): On that point, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: Let me make a bit more progress and then I will give way.

The motion also states that

> "IPSA should introduce…a new pension scheme for hon. Members which is informed by the Commission's findings"

by 2015. That is a similar timetable to that for the rest of the public service. However, as with other public service pension reform, changes should neither be retrospectively made nor have an impact on past benefits.

Mr Love: In his final report, Lord Hutton spoke warmly about the continuation of defined benefit schemes in the public sector. Is the Leader of the House fully aware of that, and does he support that recommendation?

Sir George Young: Indeed; the Government welcomed Lord Hutton's report, including the interim report, the final report and the budget. He made it clear that he wanted to retain a defined benefit scheme, and on that basis negotiations are continuing. IPSA will be mindful of that recommendation by Hutton—and, indeed, of the hon. Gentleman's views.

The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act already provides full protection for pension benefits already earned, including a link to the salary on leaving the scheme, so any new scheme would apply only to future service. Furthermore, the legislation includes comprehensive provisions requiring IPSA to consult widely before making any changes to parliamentary pensions.

Bob Russell *rose—*

Sir George Young: I think I had better give way first to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson).

Mr Anderson: I was pleased to sign amendment (a), but I want to make it clear that my case is very different from what the Leader of the House described. I believe that we are in exactly the same boat as every other public sector worker in the country and that we should be treated the same. We should be allowed, with our trustees, to negotiate with IPSA as local government pension schemes are being negotiated with their trustees and their employers. It should not be the Government who set the standard for the pensions—it should be the pension schemes.

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman will know that paragraph 15 of schedule 6 to the CRAG Act states:

> "Before making a scheme under paragraph 12 the IPSA must consult…the trustees of the Fund,"

so there is that opportunity for dialogue.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester Central) (Lab): I should make it clear that I will support the motion, but something is causing alarm bells to ring. The Leader of the House rightly says that the motion means that the parliamentary scheme will not be better than those for other public sector workers, but will he make it quite clear that nothing in the motion has any implications for the negotiations that are taking place with other public sector schemes?

Sir George Young: The motion is purely declaratory, so the hon. Gentleman is quite right. The second half of it expresses a view, on behalf of the House, that we believe we should be treated no better or worse than those in other public sector schemes. It is important that our constituents know that that is our view and that we do not expect to be treated any differently from others in the public sector.

A further development is the increase in pension contribution rates for public service schemes, as already announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The case for public service employees to pay more into their pensions and therefore reduce the burden on the taxpayer was made clearly in Lord Hutton's interim report, which was published last autumn. The report states:

> "In the short term, however, I consider there is also a strong case for looking at some increase in pension contributions for public service employees, to better meet the real costs of providing these pensions, the value of which has risen in recent years with most of these extra costs falling to taxpayers".

The subsequent statement made by the Chief Secretary made it clear that each scheme would be required to find savings equivalent to a 3.2 percentage point increase, phased in over three years, with scheme-specific discussions to make proposals on how the savings were to be achieved.

If the House accepts the principle that hon. Members should not be out of step with changes that affect other public service schemes, we should also accept that our contributions should rise at the same time. I can therefore confirm that the Government propose to increase contributions to the ministerial scheme, with increases being applied from 1 April next year on a staged basis, and we will consult on that proposal as required by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act.

Finally, I shall end where I began: the most important development of which account needs to be taken is the acceptance that MPs' remuneration should be assessed, determined and administered independently.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although there might be concerns over IPSA's role, we should not make the perfect the enemy of the good and that this debate is long overdue? We must all look our public sector constituents in the face every day and justify changing their pensions schemes.

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support and for the views she expresses.

There were constraints on IPSA taking over absolutely everything right at the beginning of this Parliament. The priority was allowances, so that was its first commitment, followed by pay. As I have said, this is the final piece in the jigsaw puzzle. We will have then passed over responsibility for the total package by 1 April next year.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): Let me make it clear that I support the motion and the thinking that lies behind it, but what will be the role of the trustees between now and 2015, and what will it be after 2015? Will they have any fiduciary responsibility for the new scheme, or will their responsibility be limited to the current scheme?

Sir George Young: The trustees will continue to administer the scheme. The chairman of the trustees might want to catch your eye, Mr Speaker. Under our changes, the rules that govern the scheme will no longer be made by the Government or the House; they will be made independently by IPSA. After the process of transfer on 1 April next year, the scheme will continue to be administered by the trustees until such time as IPSA makes any change. If it wants to make changes, it must consult the trustees. The motion indicates that the first change should be an increase in the contribution rate. It then suggests that, along with other public sector schemes, a new scheme, perhaps moving from final salary, should be introduced by 2015, but the scheme will continue to be administered by the trustees, and I pay tribute to the work they do.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm my understanding that the arrangements being put in place for the trustees, some of which come from the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act, are in line with best practice for other pension schemes?

Sir George Young: Yes; I believe that to be so. There has been no representation on the issue the hon. Lady raises. There are some changes in the composition of the trustees to reflect IPSA's responsibility, as part of the 2010 Act.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: I propose to conclude.

Independence is a crucial part of the process of restoring trust in Parliament. Any decision to defer the transfer to independence would result in MPs continuing to determine their own remuneration, which the House has firmly rejected. It is not incompatible—this goes back to some of our discussions during the debate—to argue that responsibility for our pensions should be made independent and, by agreeing to the motion today, to send a strong signal about the direction we feel the scheme should take in the light of the application of the Hutton recommendations to other public service schemes.

Subject to today's debate, I will move as quickly as possible to commence the relevant sections of the CRAG Act, transferring all responsibility for MPs' pensions to IPSA. Once responsibility for MPs' pensions has been handed to IPSA, the House will have finally relinquished the power to set the terms of its own remuneration. I hope that that will represent a significant further step in drawing a line under the problems of the past and in helping to rebuild public confidence. I commend the motion to the House.

4.4 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): As the Leader of the House says, the motion seeks to deal with some unfinished business from the previous Parliament. The order that we are debating is necessary to commence the provisions of section 40 and schedule 6 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. Those parts of the Act transfer responsibility for hon. Members' pensions to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. That legislation was passed, with all-party agreement, by the previous Government. It gained Royal Assent in April last year, just before the general election, and there was a general feeling that it was wrong for existing arrangements to be left unchanged, and that the independent determination of salaries should extend to cover pay and pensions. Having voted for the primary legislation that brings about that switch of responsibilities, we Labour Members will not oppose the motion today.

The order will change the current arrangements, under which the Leader of the House—in effect, the Government—determines MPs' pension arrangements through regulations. Following the 2009 report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the previous Government accepted in principle that the independent regulator should be given statutory responsibility for MPs' pay and pensions. While that change was being legislated for, there was, quite properly, input from the trustees of the parliamentary contributory pension fund, which ensured that Members' accrued rights had protection consistent with that provided to members of other occupational pension schemes. There was also agreement to amendments that ensured that the parliamentary contributory pension fund would continue to be a trustee-based scheme with appropriate member representation, and that required IPSA to obtain trustees' consent before making changes in the administration of the scheme.

Bob Russell: The hon. Lady rightly draws attention to the history that has led to our discussing the motion today, and to what happened in the previous Parliament. After 18 months' experience of IPSA, does she have total confidence in that organisation's ability to deliver our pensions?

Ms Eagle: We all have our IPSA stories, and we could probably dine out on them—with each other, and we would not claim it back. We all have stories about some of the absurdities of the scheme, especially at the beginning, when it was bedding in. There has been considerable progress, and I would like further progress to be made. There are ongoing ways in which we in this House can bring to light any remaining absurdities, and I hope that we can continue to iron them out. The principle of independent determination is right. IPSA seems as good a body as any—not withstanding the chaos at its beginning—to undertake all that responsibility. Clearly, we will have to wait and see whether my confidence will be rewarded, but I am willing to give IPSA a try. I know that the hon. Gentleman is somewhat more sceptical about the authority than I am.

Mr Winnick: When the Leader of the House spoke, he was justifying, on behalf of the Government, what is happening to public servants across the country, including many of our constituents who are on relatively low pay, and justifying the attack on their pensions. I certainly

[Mr Winnick]

do not agree with what is happening, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) does not.

Ms Eagle: I will come on to make a few short, in-order remarks about that aspect of our debate, but I think that most Members of the House would agree that we cannot expect to be treated differently from other public sector workers; that is a principle that most of us would share.

I was talking about appropriate Member representation on the trustee board, and the fact that IPSA, under the primary legislation and the order, will have to obtain the trustees' consent before making changes to the administration of the scheme or the management of the scheme's assets. Again—this is an important principle—it is entirely in keeping with the usual practice of other funded schemes. It is important that we maintain that parallel.

The order will change the legal structure of the parliamentary contributory pension fund. It will become an IPSA scheme and the power to amend it will be vested in IPSA rather than in the Government via regulations tabled by the Leader of the House, so the Leader of the House is giving away powers in the order. He seems to be quite happy about that. IPSA will acquire the duty to do all this, rather than the current Leader of the House.

The primary legislation ensures that there is a requirement, though, for IPSA to consult interested parties prior to determining benefits or contributions in future. In the primary legislation interested parties include the Speaker, the trustees of the scheme, the Senior Salaries Review Body, the Government, and in many ways the most important organisation in all pension deliberations—the Government Actuary's Department. This is all entirely sensible, and I look forward to IPSA undertaking this work in due course.

Bob Russell: It is incapable.

Ms Eagle: Time will tell. If IPSA proves incapable, which I doubt, I suspect we will be back here quite quickly, dealing with the consequences. I do not anticipate that we will be in that position.

Mr Redwood: The hon. Lady is making an important contribution. May I see if I have understood what she is saying? She is saying that the order does not suspend normal trustee law, so are the trustees under a duty to give their consent or to seek to modify the scheme that IPSA brings forward? I do not know whether this is a normal scheme or not.

Ms Eagle: This will be an IPSA scheme. My understanding of it, in my reading of the primary legislation which we all supported prior to the last election, is that the trustees would have the normal legal requirements and fiduciary duties in the new scheme that trustees of other schemes have. That is my understanding. I am looking at the Leader of the House, who does not seem to be shaking his head. I assume that if the Government had a different interpretation, we would have heard about it by now.

Sir George Young *rose—*

Ms Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is rising, so there may be a different interpretation. I am happy to give way.

Sir George Young: The hon. Lady is right. Paragraph 12 of schedule 6, which deals with the MPs' pension scheme, makes it absolutely clear that it is up to IPSA to devise the scheme. There are rights of consultation, but it is an independent scheme set out by IPSA.

Ms Eagle: The question from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr Redwood) that I was answering was about the duties of the trustees. My understanding, from reading the primary legislation, is that it does not impact in any differential way on the legal duties of trustees.

Bob Russell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If those on the two Front Benches cannot agree on a matter of such fundamental importance as this, how on earth can we proceed?

Mr Speaker: That is definitively not a point of order. It is a point of obvious and intense frustration.

Ms Eagle: I do not want to use the word "frustrated" in the Chamber because it is rather a difficult one to use. I did not think we were disagreeing. I thought I was answering slightly more accurately the point that the right hon. Member for Wokingham had made about trustees' duties in law. The Leader of the House was answering a slightly different question about the fact that IPSA would be in charge of the scheme. Again, that does not undermine our existing understanding of trustee law and the fiduciary duties of pension trustees.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) *rose—*

Ms Eagle: I suspect that a lawyer is going to help us with this point of debate.

Stephen Phillips: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I do not know the answer, but can she, and in due course the Leader of the House, confirm the position as I expect it to be, which is that the trustees will continue to administer the scheme for the benefit of the beneficiaries, and the terms of the scheme for existing entrants but not for their accrued contributions will be set by IPSA, as indeed will the terms of the scheme for new entrants in due course? The trustees will retain the duties that I understand them to have under the relevant legislation.

Ms Eagle: That is also my understanding, although I am not a trained lawyer, unlike the hon. and learned Gentleman. However, I did a stint as Pensions Minister so have some understanding of these matters.

Other aspects of the motion have proved more controversial, if the presence of the amendment, which proposes deleting everything from line 6, is anything to go by. The wording of the motion was not decided by cross-party agreement, unlike the decision in principle to transfer responsibility for pension arrangements to

IPSA. It is the Government's wording and appears to reflect their position on public sector pensions more generally.

When Lord Hutton produced his final report on public sector pensions, it fell to me, as shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the time, to respond to it on behalf of the Opposition. We certainly welcomed Lord Hutton's commitment to the ongoing provision of pay-as-you-go pensions in the public sector—our own included—as a matter of principle. We also noted his view that the pensions currently provided were not—to use the phrase that is bandied about—gold-plated. It is easy to forget in the welter of propaganda about the generosity of public sector pension provision that the majority of public sector pensioners receive less than £5,600 a year. Indeed, many beneficiaries are part-time women workers who take home considerably less than that after a lifetime of service. Both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have been guilty of using that alarmist phrase. We may have a far better and more measured debate about these important matters if they would accept what Lord Hutton has said and stop using that highly misleading and derogatory phrase about public sector pension provision.

Although Lord Hutton made the case for an increase in contributions, which is mentioned in the motion, he did not specify what it should be. He stated on page 119 of his interim report that the Government

"should have regard to protecting the low paid and to the possibility of significant increases in the number of employees opting out of schemes and should consider staging increases in contributions where appropriate, to minimise this risk."

After the Hutton report was published, the Opposition recognised the merit of considering a move to career average benefits, rather than final salary schemes. We also recognised the pressure generated in all pension schemes—again, ours is no different—by increasing life expectancy. We had acknowledged this in government by negotiating changes to existing schemes involving increases in contributions, later retirement ages and "cap and share" arrangements. These agreements will save £1 billion a year.

Clearly, MPs' pensions cannot be immune from such changes, and I am sure that IPSA will consider that in due course when it looks at what our future contributions and benefits should be. I am also sure that it will take into account the 1.9% increase in contributions that was agreed in 2009 as a cost-saving measure in our scheme, which takes Members' contributions to 11.9%, 7.9% or 5.9% of salary depending on the chosen accrual rate. Likewise, I expect IPSA to take into account the fact that the average time a Member serves in the House is 15 years.

I know that some right hon. and hon. Members have suspicions about the timing of today's motion, which is ahead of any outcome of the so-called negotiations on the pension provision for millions of public sector workers. The motion might be read in a certain way, as if it is pre-empting those negotiations, because it states that IPSA should increase Members' pension contributions

"in line with changes in pension contribution rates for other public services schemes."

The fact is that the talks are ongoing. If they are to have any meaning whatsoever, rather than being exposed as a charade, we cannot know in advance what their results will be.

Mr Mark Field: I understand some of the hon. Lady's concerns about pre-emption, but does she not also think that at this juncture we need to take a lead on this, despite all the concerns I have—I hope that she will be able to say a little more on the relatively generous rates for parliamentary contributions, compared with others—given the difficulties we will face throughout the public pensions sphere?

Ms Eagle: It is certainly important that we are not seen to exempt ourselves from the required changes, and in this debate so far that sense has been put across by speakers on both sides of the House.

The Government have to show understanding and good will if they are to make progress on public sector pensions.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as ever, and the point that she makes is the real one: nothing in today's vote in the House should be seen to pre-empt the legitimate negotiating process that is taking place with millions of public sector workers. If something should not be pre-empted in particular, it is the opportunity for the Government to say that, somehow, the motion before us gives them legitimacy in refusing to negotiate in good faith with public sector unions.

Ms Eagle: I agree. I certainly hope that the Government want to negotiate in good faith with public sector unions, and I understand that sector-specific talks have been going on. In education there were meetings last Wednesday, in health there are meetings tomorrow, and the civil service has had a few meetings, because on public sector pensions it is hard to generalise. The schemes are quite different, and the local government scheme is funded completely differently.

I understand also that a meeting is due a week today between the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Cabinet Office Minister with responsibility for the central talks, and I certainly hope that all sides show flexibility so that there can be a negotiated settlement.

Mr Winnick: Does my hon. Friend agree that, after a lifetime working in public service, and with the expectation of a pension somewhere in the region of £5,000, many of our constituents will not accept a reduction because the House has today decided that its pension scheme is going to be different? They would be daft to be so persuaded, and they will not be.

Ms Eagle: I do not think that I was making that argument, and I hope that the negotiations will be meaningful and successful.

Mr Anderson: It is quite clear from my discussions with people in the negotiations that the Government are not negotiating seriously: they have made the point that they want a 3% reduction no matter what. All they are talking about is how they should do it, not whether they should do it, and no evidence has come forward—there are no actuarial reports and there is no cognisance—of the impact that the number of people dropping out, which could be in the hundreds of thousands, will have not just on those schemes, but on the investment potential of those schemes.

Ms Eagle: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly good point, and I hope that the Government are listening. They have to show understanding and good will if they are to make appropriate progress on public sector pensions, especially at a time of pay freezes and the most ferocious squeeze on living standards since the great depression.

The Government should not play politics with this issue, and they cannot take our support for the motion as any endorsement of the way in which they have so far chosen to pre-empt meaningful negotiations with public sector trade unions to resolve the outstanding issues on pensions caused by the announcement of an across-the-board 3.2% increase in contributions, a shift from RPI to CPI for indexation—

Mr Bone: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Eagle: Yes, of course.

Mr Bone: The shadow Leader of the House is making quite a powerful argument. I think that she is arguing for the amendment, because it would remove all the talk that she is particularly concerned about. Is she arguing for the amendment?

Ms Eagle: The trouble with the amendment, as the hon. Gentleman would probably admit if he sat down and thought about it, is that, the amended motion would look like we wanted our public sector pension to be treated differently from the generality of public sector pensions, and that would be an unfortunate impression. I hope that he reflects on that meaning of the amendment, to which he has put his name, and thinks better of it when it comes to the debate.

I was in the middle of saying that the outstanding issues caused by the announcement of an across-the-board 3.2% increase in contributions, a shift from RPI to CPI for indexation and speeding up the increase of retirement ages, the latter of which hits women particularly hard, are real issues that I hope the Government will address with good will in the negotiations, rather than regard as a complete fait accompli.

Mr Mark Field: Does not the hon. Lady recognise that one reason for what she would regard as this breakneck speed of reform of the age of retirement and pension arrangements is that so little was done, and not just in the past 13 years, since one could argue, given the actuarial evidence about life expectancy, that the inaction goes back well before 1997? The force of necessity has meant that the Government have had to act relatively quickly to make up for very slothful action from past Governments.

Ms Eagle: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's interpretation at all. We sometimes agree on things; we do not happen to agree on this. We made some good reforms and we saved considerable amounts of money through the negotiations that we had on public sector pensions, which came to an agreement. I am arguing that MPs' pensions should not be exempt from changes, regardless of whether they are independently provided for and decided on.

I hope that the Government show determination and good will in having meaningful negotiations with the representatives of millions of public sector workers whom they are meeting, and that they recognise the real challenges and dangers, as Lord Hutton pointed out, of going too far and too fast on contribution rates and driving people to leave schemes at a time when there is a ferocious squeeze on living standards. There is a balance to be negotiated, and I am not at all certain that the Government are getting that balance right. If they get it wrong, many hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people will leave schemes and will then look forward to a life on means-tested benefits when they retire, which, paradoxically, will cost the country more than if we can keep them paying into schemes. There is a delicate balance that has not often been reflected in the rhetoric—the bellicose rhetoric, in some cases—from Government Members as these negotiations proceed.

I hope that there will be a new and constructive approach from the Government in the ongoing negotiations on public sector pensions. In the meantime, we will support the motion.

4.27 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My amendment effectively separates the two distinct issues in the motion and says that the first of those—whether the issue of pensions should be referred to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority—is something that we should support today. Indeed, it might not have been necessary to have a debate, because the Government could have dealt with it, and done so earlier, by laying an order under subordinate legislation.

The second part of the motion was described by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House as declaratory, in that we do not expect to be treated any better or any worse than other public sector employees. If that is what it actually said, I am sure that there would not be any dispute. Certainly, I would not have tabled an amendment, and I do not think that the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) would have been as troubled as he, too, is about this issue.

My right hon. Friend said that the essence is that we are handing over to IPSA the responsibility for looking at our whole remuneration package, including salary, allowances and pensions, and ensuring that it should be able to do that independently. As he and the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) said, once IPSA has that responsibility, it will make proposals or issue a consultation paper and invite comments from you, Mr Speaker, from the Government, from Members of Parliament, from members of the public, and from other so-called stakeholders. The Government seem to be pre-empting that consultation process by saying, "Irrespective of whether IPSA asks us any questions, we're going to volunteer some answers before we've been asked the questions."

The hon. Member for Wallasey raised a number of key issues that she thinks IPSA should take into account when it considers parliamentary pensions. It was not an exhaustive list, but it contained a number of points that are not included in the second part of the motion. The second part of the motion therefore invites colleagues to sign up to a selective list of propositions, including that there should be an increase in contribution rates from 1 April next year

> "in line with changes in pension contribution rates for other public service schemes."

However, no standard formula affects all other public service schemes, which vary from one to another. The Government have said that any increases in contributions should be made in progressively and in stages. That is not included in the motion.

The motion states that the House

"supports the approach to public service pension reform".

I do not think that is a controversial issue, but it is important that we do nothing to undermine our commitment to the belief that this is now the responsibility of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. We should not give it authority with one hand while putting constraints on it with the other. That is where the Government have got it wrong; they are seeking to interfere in the process.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I see no discrepancy in the Government seeking to apply the principles of public sector reform to the decisions that IPSA will ultimately take, as is stated in the motion. That does not preclude IPSA from consulting on the finer details, as my hon. Friend said. It is important that it is explicit in the motion that the principles of the wider public sector reforms should be applicable to MPs' pensions. It is imperative that the message goes out that that is what we are voting for.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. That may well be imperative, but it is also imperative that interventions from now on are brief, because a number of people wish to speak. I remind the House that a debate of exceptional importance is to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. I do not think that I am alone in hoping that that debate will not be delayed unduly.

Mr Chope: I will make a brief response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), Mr Speaker. What she says about perceptions is important. That is why it is essential that the Government do not bring forward motions that seem to be designed to appeal to an outside audience, while at the same time leaving things rather vague and open to the accusation that they are trying to tie the hands of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

Stephen Phillips: Surely all that the second part of the motion does is establish that we should be treated in precisely the same way as other public servants.

Mr Chope: It does not say that, actually, because if it did, it would be worded in that way. That is how it is being interpreted. If nothing else comes from this debate, something will have been achieved if that is how the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority interprets the motion. My concern and the concern of many colleagues is that it seems as though the Government have picked a few items and put them in the motion.

To take one public service scheme as an example, the Government have made it quite clear that they do not think that the principles we are talking about today should apply to the armed forces scheme. I support the Government in that, but it is a completely separate issue from trying to tie the hands of IPSA at this stage. IPSA will come forward with its proposals and they will go out to consultation, at which point the Government will have a chance to express a view, as will everybody else.

Mr Redwood: Am I right in remembering that the idea of the Hutton proposals was that they should be negotiated between the representatives of the employees and the employers? Does my hon. Friend think that that is the idea in this case as well?

Mr Chope: My right hon. Friend is, as almost always, absolutely right. The hon. Member for Blaydon made the point that in the public sector, proper negotiations are going on based upon information about specific schemes and about employment issues overall. It seems that for some reason, the Government are trying to pre-empt that negotiation, although we have a strong and independent group of trustees for our pension scheme.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I tried to negotiate with the Government a slightly longer debate on this issue, believing that we should take it up to 7 o'clock. I lost out in that negotiation, so now I feel it is incumbent on me to reduce my remarks pro rata to give others the chance to participate. I have tabled the amendment as a probing amendment, and I have been quite interested in the reaction that it has engendered. Since I tabled it I have heard colleagues say that they think I am on to a good thing, and that they would support it if the House were to divide. However, I will wait and see the view of others before making a final decision on that.

4.36 pm

Mr Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): As the chairman of the pension fund, I have had many meetings with the Leader of the House and with the chairman of IPSA. As a consequence of my concerns and those that other trustees had expressed, I wrote to every Member of Parliament. They should have received the letter on Thursday by e-mail and over the weekend by post. I presume that, as a consequence, much that I would have said does not need to be said, but I can assure all Members and former Members that I and the trustees will take on board any observations and questions that they may have.

I would argue that we are where we are today as a consequence of successive Governments, since time immemorial, interfering with MPs' conditions of service. That is the whole reason for this debate today and why IPSA was introduced. On that basis, it seems strange that even at this late stage, the Government continue to think they can interfere with our conditions of service by putting motions such as this before the House. I reject their position and do not think it is right.

I believe that, having been given its new responsibility, IPSA should be fully independent. It is proving itself to be so in the discussions that I have with it. It has assured the board of trustees that it will operate free of Government interference on this subject and on conditions of service across the board.

Bob Russell: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify precisely what he has been promised and who promised it to him? Is it in writing?

Mr Donohoe: What has been suggested is in the minutes of the board of trustees, and it is open to the hon. Gentleman to ask for a copy of them. He will see the discussions that have taken place.

Bob Russell *rose—*

Mr Donohoe: I do not have time to give way again, because I am conscious of the fact that so many Members want to intervene or make speeches. Rather than reading out the minutes of meetings, if the hon. Gentleman writes to me I will furnish him with that information.

Mr Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Donohoe: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman if I get to a point at which I have some leeway, but I have some important things to outline before I take any further interventions.

The trustees of the time had no choice about the move to IPSA, which was agreed by a motion of the House. However, they fought for and won significant concessions within the Bill that made the change. There is absolutely no doubt that the protection of Members' pensions was at the forefront of their discussion, and I have to praise the staff and advisers of the pension unit and its previous chairman, Sir John Butterfill. They are to be congratulated on the protection that they got for the pensions of Members and retired Members.

The legislation necessary to transfer the Leader of the House's powers to IPSA was in place before my appointment as chairman of the board of trustees, but as I continue I shall tell the House that the trustees will have important powers that they did not have previously. The transfer of powers was agreed, as all hon. Members will know, in the wake of the expenses scandal, following the recommendations of the Kelly report. One recommendation was that IPSA should have statutory responsibility for setting Members' pay, which of course includes pensions, and other conditions of service. It is important to understand that that must be done in consultation with the House. IPSA also has the responsibility of oversight for the administration of Members' pensions.

Therefore, amendments to schedule 6 to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 were made to give effect to the decision to transfer powers over pensions. That is what the Act was all about, and that is what it achieves. However, Members who read the Act will find that aspects of it clearly transfer more powers to the board of trustees.

Mr Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman make that clear, because I do not quite understand him? Is he saying that the trustees have the power and the duty either to consent to IPSA proposals or to withhold their consent? If they have that power, how might they use it?

Mr Donohoe: The trustees do not have that power. Given IPSA's independence, which is enshrined in legislation, at the end of the day, it makes the ultimate decision, but it must do so after meaningful consultation with the trustees. Any changes that IPSA wishes to make to the pension fund must be reported to the Speaker and laid before the House. That is the power within the Act.

The trustees at the time were presented with the proposals to amend the 2010 Act. They asked for and got a number of amendments, but they had no power to overturn the Government's proposals, which were eventually agreed. I can tell the House that the trustees made an exceptional effort and fought extremely hard in that period, and they won numerous and significant protections for Members' pension benefits. By way of an example, accrued benefits will be fully protected after the transfer. Because the benefits have been built up, they obviously must be protected, but they are not currently protected and they could be interfered with. That is a clear indication of what the trustees were able to implement—that protection will be enshrined in legislation following the transfer. I do not have time to give more examples, but I can give them to hon. Members after the debate if they want me to.

IPSA can make changes to MPs' future pension benefits and contributions only after formal consultation with the trustees, the majority of whom, following the transfer of the power, which will happen whenever the Leader of the House gets round to signing the order, will be Members of Parliament or former Members of Parliament. That is an enhancement of the trustees' powers, because there is currently no such requirement.

Currently, there are 10 trustees—eight are Members of Parliament and two are former Members, but when the order is signed, one trustee will be appointed by the board of IPSA and one will come from the Government. The Ministry for the civil service, the head of which is the Prime Minister, will appoint the latter. I do not suppose the Prime Minister wants to become the trustee of the Members' pension fund, but who knows?

Mr Bone: I do not understand why we have suddenly created a post for the Government in the running of Members' pensions.

Mr Donohoe: I will explain. That individual would be responsible only for representing the Ministers' section of the pension fund. A former Minister would have a different contribution rate. I see the Leader of the House agreeing with me on this. The pension fund administers that at present and will continue to do so, but by virtue of the contribution, it will come from the Department that the person was in or from the civil service. The Government are not going to start playing a part in the Members' pension fund. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.

There was originally a proposal in the Bill that members of the board of trustees could be removed by IPSA. That has now been forgotten, and the eight members of the board will continue to be appointed by this House and no one else. They will continue to be elected or selected from this place or from among former Members. At our trustees' meeting on Thursday, we thought it sensible to determine that we would lose two members at this stage so that this whole process could be carried out smoothly. Otherwise, all sorts of complications could have arisen. As a consequence, I would like to put on record my appreciation—and that of the other members of the board—for my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) and the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), both of whom have now withdrawn as trustees.

The increase in contributions is the main point of any argument on this matter. I have already argued, and I want to reinforce the point, that IPSA must be seen in every respect as independent. I see no reason why the House should indicate that it would like our pension contributions to be treated in the same way as those of other public service workers. IPSA has a statutory duty to act independently of Parliament, and by giving such an indication, the House is putting undue pressure on IPSA. It should not be influencing IPSA in that way. IPSA must undertake its role as laid down in statute, and in no other way.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Surely it is important, however, for the House to make it clear that MPs should not be treated differently from other public sector workers. In particular, we should try to avoid a repeat of the bizarre situation earlier this year in which we had to take back powers to set our own pay because the Senior Salaries Review Body had recommended a pay rise for MPs in a year when the rest of the public sector faced a pay freeze. Any such pay rise would have been entirely inappropriate.

Mr Donohoe: I have to disagree with the hon. Lady, and I will tell her why. If we put things out to independent arbiters such as the Senior Salaries Review Body, and they make recommendations after consultation with all sorts of bodies, I would argue that the Government should not intervene. In that case in particular, we should not have overturned that decision. This is where we have gone wrong so many times in the past. In the great number of years that I have been a Member of Parliament, I have seen this happen time and again, and my research leads me to believe that every Prime Minister since 1945 with the exception of John Major has interfered in the conditions of service of Members of Parliament to the detriment of those conditions.

I feel strongly about this—so strongly that, as the arch-enemy of IPSA, I argue on the basis of what I have seen that it is far better for it to have that independence, which is clearly documented in legislation, than to have this constant interference in the conditions of service of Members of Parliament. There has not been a great understanding by the Government of some of the elements of the arguments with IPSA.

Given that pay and pensions are linked, it is only sensible for IPSA to take stock not only of all elements of conditions of service, but of the whole question of pensions, which I have always believed to be deferred income for any individual in employment who has a pension fund.

Other considerations relating to IPSA in consultation with trustees include the fact that it has to wait for a valuation. Here, as I say, the Government have not fully understood the position on Members' pensions or the calculations of where they should go in respect of any increase in contributions, any increase in the age of retirement or any other element affecting those pensions. Clearly, the results of the 2011 valuation of the scheme will shortly be finalised, which I take as a very strong argument for leaving the decision about increases in contributions, if there are to be increases, to IPSA itself. As far as we are concerned, we are in a cost-sharing scheme, as a result of which we must see what the actuary says about any changes to contribution rates before taking a decision that puts us in line with anybody else. As Members will know, there have been increases to pension contributions over a relatively recent period, which I do not think any other members of the public sector have had to face. I suggest that it is important to take that into account, as we are told it will be by IPSA.

I suggest that trustees would also recommend giving further thought to other cost-saving measures in the scheme to make it simpler and to make the benefits clear in a way that everybody understands. From the discussions I have had with Members of Parliament over the last few weeks, I believe that there has been a misunderstanding of many aspects of the scheme. That needs to be taken into account. We also need to consider, if possible, as a means of getting away from increases in contributions, the whole question of increasing the pension or retirement age. It could be part of the answer to some of the problems we face.

Another misunderstanding is the view that this scheme is expensively funded in itself. Schemes like this should be treated differently from unfunded or notionally funded schemes, as assessing changes to member contribution rates should take into account any excess returns generated by funded schemes from the investment strategy. I understand that the London Pension Fund Authority scheme, which is a funded scheme, might not be subject to the general contribution increase that the Government hope to implement. If there are exceptions there, they can be made anywhere else. I am convinced that an awful lot of negotiations are still to take place, and these will bring to the fore some of the elements of the pension fund that are not best understood.

Mr Anderson: Is there not a big problem with this whole debate in that we talk about these things as if they are a matter of negotiation, but in fact what we are really talking about is the fact that the Government are imposing a stealth tax on all public sector workers? They are not having negotiations about that, and they are not taking actuarial advice or the effect of the schemes into account. All they are saying is, "There will be an increase on public sector workers' pensions" as a matter of fact—without allowing negotiations about any scheme to be taken into account.

Mr Donohoe: I am not in a position to answer that, as it is for the Leader of the House to do so, although I certainly have some sympathy with what my hon. Friend says.

Some of the closest comparators to Members are senior civil servants. Members of the civil service pension scheme and other schemes such as the scheme for staff of the House of Commons and the House of Lords pay either 3.5% or 1.5% contributions, depending on when they joined the civil service. For that contribution, they either build up a pension at the rate of one sixtieth, or one eightieth plus tax-free cash sum—which equates to one sixty-fourth—with a retirement age of 60, or they build up a pension at the rate of one forty-third with a retirement age of 65. That must be taken into account along with everything else in which we will be involved between now and 2015. It is clear from the discussions that have taken place that consideration must be given to all elements of Members' contributions.

[Mr Donohoe]

People may think that I only represent the House in this regard, but I have constituents who are aggrieved by what is happening to their pension funds, and I have every sympathy with them. However, I am here almost as a shop steward—I am not sure that that expression is much liked on the Government Benches—to represent Members in the context of their conditions of service. People describe this as a gold-plated scheme, but although it is a good scheme—indeed, I would argue that it is a brilliant scheme—what is not understood is that only a few Members of Parliament retire from this place with a full pension. Of the 650 serving Members of Parliament, only 35 would leave with one today. Another thing that is not understood is that most Members pay for the rate of one fortieth, which means paying 11.9%. So the scheme cannot really be described as gold-plated.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that Members may have already contributed to pension schemes before being elected to the House? They do not generally come here at the age of 21.

Mr Donohoe: The regulations restrict the level of pension that can be paid on retirement. The limit is generally two thirds of pay inclusive of pensions that people have built up before becoming Members of Parliament. I think that that answers the hon. Lady's question. As most MPs have other pension entitlements, the restriction means that a number of them are not paid the pension of one fortieth for each year of their parliamentary service. Worse, a small number of MPs who have not transferred their pensions to the fund end up subsidising the Exchequer by continuing to make contributions for a period for which they will receive no pension. That, too, is not best understood by those who criticise us.

I understand that the legislation allows Members to opt out. If there were an increase in the level of the contribution and if I were 45, I should find things very difficult. Given domestic circumstances, not every Member of Parliament is rich, and those who are not would find it difficult to continue to make their contributions. I understand that that also applies to many members of the fire service, for instance. There will be a drift, and if that gathers pace—as it could—the pension fund will suffer and the Exchequer will eventually have to fund more than it does at present. That must be factored into the equation before any change is made.

Our discussions with IPSA suggest—and Sir Ian Kennedy himself has stated—that it has determined that MPs' conditions of service will be dealt with fairly, that it will work closely with the trustees once the powers are transferred, and that it would welcome proposals from the trustees on how the relationship should work. I have put that on record because it was said. At the trustee meeting Sir Ian attended, he went on to say that IPSA's statutory independent role will be maintained. Importantly, that includes independence in respect of public perception. I think the public realise that, and I know the trustees will hold them to that point.

5 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): My perception of IPSA over the past 18 months is such that I have zero confidence in it. Although the amendment's wording is not perfect, it offers me the only opportunity I will have to put that perception on the record, which I can do by voting against the motion. I fear that in the fullness of time Members will rue the day they handed their pensions to IPSA.

However, if it were not for my experience of the last 18 months, which the vast majority of Members share, I would be voting for the motion, as I recognise the importance of our pension scheme and salaries being independent. My reason for not voting for the motion is purely lack of faith in the competence of IPSA. I want to stress, however, that I am not talking about its hard-working staff. They are up the same creek as us; they are in a different canoe, as it were, but, in common with us, they have no paddle.

My criticism is entirely of the IPSA board. One only has to read the minutes of its meetings to realise that it has in mind not user-friendliness in respect of Members of Parliament but, rather, hostility. I serve on the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and, interestingly, in the 18 months since it was established we have yet to meet the full IPSA board. That is astonishing.

I have concerns about the part of the motion that the amendment would delete. The motion says that following on from the work of the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission, IPSA will draw up a new scheme

> "which is informed by the Commission's findings and their subsequent application to other public service pension schemes".

I venture that we could latch on to some such schemes without IPSA being involved in any shape or form.

I appreciate that many other Members wish to speak. I have put my concerns on the record and stressed that I am not criticising IPSA staff. My criticisms are purely of the policies of the IPSA board. I conclude by noting that the National Audit Office has issued a report that is not exactly flattering to IPSA. It says it does not represent value for money and that it has brought in a scheme in which 38% of all claims cost more to administer than the claim itself. It has also found that 91% of Members of this House are now subsidising their work and that a large part of the reason for that is the systems introduced by IPSA.

5.3 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): It would be hard to argue with what the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) has just said if we had not already agreed to do this. We are halfway down the line, and we have been since before the last general election when we said we would give IPSA this responsibility. The debate should have stopped then. We should have said, "Right, we agree today that we're going to do something we should have been doing over the last 16 months. We're going to tell IPSA to get on with it by sitting down with our trustees and negotiating a settlement based on the way pension schemes across the world operate."

Why are we having this debate tonight on a lengthy motion that pulls in public sector pensions? I take the Leader of the House at his word of course, but I am convinced that other people will use this debate as a stick to beat public sector workers over the head with. They will say, "MPs have agreed to have their pensions changed, so why don't you?" That is the wrong way to deal with something as integral to someone's terms and conditions as their pension. The terms and conditions of public sector workers, or of any other worker in this country, should be based on a genuine debate between the employer representative for the pension scheme—IPSA in our case—and the trustees. They should come together to weigh up the evidence about what the scheme does, what it is there for, whether it is sustainable and whether there is evidence to back changes.

This country faces a situation in which the Treasury is telling us that a levy must be imposed on those in the public sector, which in some cases will be 3% and for us could well be 5%, without any account having been taken of whether it is legitimate, whether it makes schemes affordable or whether, as has been said, it makes them less sustainable. A survey carried out by YouGov for the Fire Brigades Union suggested that 27% of its members could opt out and 12% would be very likely to opt out of their scheme if these changes go through. Unison has suggested that 350,000 people could opt out of these schemes. These schemes are good for the people in them. They are not gold-plated, but they are probably as good as most people in work can get. If people opt out, that will affect not just those individuals but will have a huge effect on the investment potential of this country, because those pension schemes invest heavily in the stock market.

Mr Bone: The hon. Gentleman is putting his point fairly. I might well agree with the Government's approach to pension reforms, but I am surprised that the motion states that "this House" supports it. This is the wrong debate in which to make that statement.

Mr Anderson: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. This debate should be about the processes of this House—House business is about that, not the politics of this House. It should be about whether we agree that this is the right way for Members of this House, and whoever comes after us, to be treated. This should not be about whether this suits someone's political agenda and allows them to go outside and say, "Look, MPs think it's legitimate to have a 5% or 3% levy. Why won't you do the same?", but my worry is that that is what this is about.

Let us not forget that we had a debate that concluded three years ago about public sector pensions, including our own. That resulted in big changes to public sector pensions. As has been suggested by our trustee colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe), a cut-off was introduced: people would retain the benefits if they joined before a certain date, but for those who joined after and for new members the pension contributions would be more and their benefits would be less. Public sector workers agreed to that three years ago on the basis that it would make their pensions sustainable for the future. Nothing has changed since then, except for the fact that the Government want to impose a levy on public sector workers to try to dig themselves out of the hole created by the collapse of the global financial system. That approach is clearly wrong. Public sector workers should not have to carry the can for the failure of the banks, and that is clearly the message being given throughout the world.

My worry is that if we tell people that they should start paying 50% more for their pensions at a time when they face pay freezes, freezes of increments, a tax on shift payments, potential redundancies and so on, they will walk away from these pension schemes, as I said earlier. That will be to the detriment of the schemes, investment and the welfare system, because as people reach retirement age there will be a bigger drain on the welfare state than there would have been had they been able to provide for themselves.

This approach is a con trick. It is not about pensions' stabilisation; it is about taking money out of the pockets of nurses, firefighters, street cleaners, social workers and home care workers to pay for the failures of capitalism. The truth is that we should stand together with those workers, as public sector workers, in a debate that is about our terms and conditions. They have a similar debate about their terms and conditions and we should say, "We stand in solidarity with you. It's wrong that the Government are robbing you for your pension and taking money out of your pockets."

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I should declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on occupational pensions. I am puzzled by where the hon. Gentleman is going on this, because the motion is surely all about the parliamentary pension fund rather than about those of trade union members in general.

Mr Anderson: If the hon. Gentleman had been here from the start of the debate, he would realise that it has expanded into a discussion about public sector pensions because they are included in the motion, in which the Leader of the House has clearly linked this scheme with other applicable schemes. Some of us who signed the amendment want to remove that link so that we can have a debate about when and whether we will give IPSA the right that it should have had since last May. If we had had that debate, we would not be sitting here now and we could have talked about the issue that most people in the House today want to talk about.

Ultimately, we are showing support for other public sector workers and we are not saying that we are a special case. We are saying that the Government should not make any public sector worker a special case by making them pay a levy to subsidise the failure of the banking system.

5.10 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I rise to support the motion, and although I appreciate the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), I think his amendment is unnecessary.

I must admit that I never thought I would be talking about my pension. Perhaps because I do not have dependants, I did not immediately rush to the pension scheme booklet to have a look at what I should or should not do, but just went for the default—as most new Members probably did—of 11.9% of my pay. However, I want to ask a few questions that I would like IPSA to bear in mind, and perhaps the Government might respond to them later.

Will the scheme to which we contribute be wound up or frozen? There is a difference, in that the Government might be expected to continue with contributions for the closed scheme in the future depending on its status.

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

As regards any deficit or surplus—I do not know the latest on that—will the Government confirm that any future contributions will not be used to top up any deficit, but that the Treasury will make good the scheme as and when it is closed to new members and fresh contributions from members?

I encourage IPSA to consider schemes that are permanently funded, not unfunded, as it were; what other quasi-public organisations have done; and whether they have used salary sacrifice or similar schemes to ensure—how can I put this?—that the scheme still represents good value for us all. I hope that IPSA will also consider how Members can vary their contribution. I was interested to hear what the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe), the chairman of the trustees, said about how people might unwittingly end up subsidising other Members or, indeed, the Treasury. Some education on that would be helpful. Will the Government also make a statement about bringing forward proposals on the ministerial pension fund and whether any changes will be made to that on the basis of career average earnings or salary at the time of being a Minister? Some parity would be helpful.

I would say to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) that I do not see the motion as one that beats up public sector workers. I understand his honourable perspective, which leads him to say that we should not accept this if we are not prepared to accept it for the people we represent. I, like other Members on both sides of the House, believe that we cannot make proposals, which were suggested by Lord Hutton, if we are not prepared to follow them ourselves. If we are asking other people to make a sacrifice—I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is not, but those on the Front Benches agree in this instance—it is paramount that we should be prepared to, too.

I appreciate that other Members wish to speak and that there is a very important debate to come, so my final point is that nobody should be surprised by this, either on the Government Benches or elsewhere. If I heard correctly, the Treasury is contributing 28% and our contributions are roughly 12%, and a 40% contribution towards a pension scheme is not sustainable for any organisation. My former employer used to offer contributions into the high 30s and took the decision to close the scheme. We need to ensure that what we do acts as a role model for companies and for the public sector.

5.14 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) who, as usual, made a number of good points. I think it would be wrong if I did not mention the speech of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe), which I thought was the most reasoned and sensible speech of the whole debate. Uncharacteristically, the Leader of the House was not on his best form and did not show his usual charitable nature. I think that when he reads *Hansard* tomorrow, he will regret the remarks he made about the implied position of Members who signed the amendment, which was quite wrong. I really think that, on reflection, he will regret saying that.

The emoluments of Members should be a matter for the House and Members should have a free vote and be allowed to make their own minds up—this should not be party whipped. That is where a lot of the problems with our pensions and salaries have occurred in the past, with every party leader trying to bid lower to attract what they thought was the best press coverage on the issue. I do not think that a single Member has said that our pension scheme should not go to IPSA. What I am concerned about is our sending it to IPSA, and then the Executive—the very Government who say they want there to be an independent look at how our pensions are run—telling that independent scheme what to do. That is the whole problem.

The amendment is very simple. It simply takes out all the garbage, goes to the heart of the matter and transfers our pension scheme to IPSA for IPSA to make up its own mind. I am quite sure that Sir Ian Kennedy will ignore the rest of the motion anyway, saying that it is just a representation and that IPSA will make its own mind up. It seems to me that the Government can quite properly make their own submission but that they cannot tie it to the House. Members should be able to make their own submissions and it is wrong to try to force this through. This is what every single Executive have done since I have been here. I say to the Government, "You really have to butt out; you have to leave the pay, conditions and expenses to IPSA." With all due respect to the Leader of the House, I will have a 10p bet with him that we will be back here again voting on our salaries, because the Government at some stage will not like something that IPSA has recommended.

Let me address the comments of the shadow Leader of the House. I am amazed that the Opposition are going to vote for a motion that states that the House

> "supports the approach to public service pension reform set out in the Final Report of the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission chaired by Lord Hutton of Furness".

I might think that is a good idea, but I did not think that was the Opposition's view. If they vote for this motion, they are voting for that. They cannot argue about it because it is on the Order Paper.

Ms Angela Eagle: I spent a little time talking about some aspects of the Hutton report that we did support, and I also made observations on some aspects of the Hutton report to which I thought the Government should pay more attention. I think my speech was entirely in keeping with our response to the Hutton report to date—as the hon. Gentleman will see if he reads it in *Hansard* tomorrow.

Mr Bone: I listened very carefully to the hon. Lady. If this motion goes through, the Government will quite rightly be able to say that the official Opposition support the wording because they voted for it in the House of Commons. That may well be her position—I am happy to accept that—but this is not the right place to be debating this issue.

Mr Chope: Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment at the obvious lack of intellectual rigour being applied to this issue by those on the Opposition Front Bench?

Mr Bone: That is tempting, but I do not think it is that. I think that the Opposition are between a rock and a hard place. They do not want to support that particular point, but, equally, they do not want to be spun against by the Government who will say, "There we are, the official Opposition didn't want to restrict our pensions." That is what they are really scared of. They have decided that they would rather put the perception in the papers above taking a principled stand. Time and again we do that in the House, and I think it is a huge mistake.

Richard Graham: How would my hon. Friend answer his constituents in the public services whose pensions are about to be significantly downgraded when they ask him why the parliamentary pension scheme remains the most generous of all and whether he missed the opportunity to amend it?

Mr Bone: That is simple to answer in the way that I hope that my hon. Friend would answer it: the House believes that our pensions, expenses and salaries must be determined independently, so they should be determined by the independent body, not by him or me. That is how we got into this mess in the first place. I hope that he and all other Members would make that point.

I came to the House expecting the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) to be a probing amendment, because we thought that the Government would say that this was up to IPSA, that this was just their view and that it was an independent matter. Unfortunately, the remarks of the Leader of the House have so incensed me that, if my hon. Friend wishes to put the amendment to the vote, I shall support him.

5.20 pm

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Although I do not agree with the final few words of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), I agree with much of the rest of what he said. If this was genuinely the last time that the House would ever consider these issues, I would be rejoicing and might even be entirely persuaded by what the Leader of the House said. He knows as well as I do that, if IPSA recommends a significant salary increase in advance of April 2013, the Government—perhaps even a Government with him still as Leader of the House—will introduce a two-line Bill to ensure that we do not vote on the proposal.

This is a crying shame: we got into this mess, going back 25 or 30 years, because Executives repeatedly interfered with salaries, general remuneration, pensions and expenses, and there seems to be no end in sight. I have not been reassured by what has been said. I have quite a lot of sympathy with what the Government are trying to achieve, but I would have even more sympathy if they had said, "This is IPSA's responsibility. Let IPSA get on with it." That was the position as we understood it when the bomb went off less than three years ago over the expenses row.

At the beginning of 2009—a somewhat different time—I wrote an article for the *Daily Mail* arguing that the disparity between public sector and private sector funded pensions had the makings of an enormous political controversy. I recognised that MPs would have to take a lead and that the public sector, which includes us, had to wake up to the reality of higher life expectancy and the unchallenged cost of unfunded pensions.

We must place on record some commonly misunderstood facts about our so-called brilliant pension scheme. We have quite a generous pension scheme, about which the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe) and for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) made important contributions. Compared with many other pension schemes, ours is well funded, but those who are on the one fortieth scheme already pay a 11.9% contribution, which is considerably higher than the norm for other public sector pensions. Those facts never seem to be mentioned by hon. Members or the press when the issues are discussed.

I very much agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough about the lesson to be learned from recent months: we might have hoped that the Executive would stop trying to pander to every whim of the press. Unfortunately, the motion seems to be a little more governed by tomorrow's headlines than by the justice of the case. I say that with some regret, because I broadly agree that Members of Parliament should take a lead on the issue but should not pre-empt other discussions—that would be wrong, too, given the great difficulties the country will face.

I regret that, once again, the Government, like so many before them, have failed to grasp the nettle on MPs' remuneration and to consider our salaries, expenses and pensions in the round, rather than disjointedly holding a debate every six or nine months and reducing our total remuneration at the margins.

Above all, the lesson that we ought to have learned from recent times is that we should leave this to an independent body. IPSA now, rightly, sets our rules. I understand some of the concerns about IPSA's operation expressed by the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell). I have had some of my own concerns about it, as I am sure many hon. Members have, but it would be far better to leave IPSA to recommend an appropriate contribution, rather than have the sense of interference.

I go along with the motion. I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) that the amendment will not necessarily be pressed to a vote. We have a very important debate to follow, so I am glad to hear that, and I praise the Leader of the House for ensuring that we have a fairly full debate on Hillsborough. That debate is not just for Members of Parliament from Merseyside or south Yorkshire, where the terrible events took place; as a keen football fan, and the vice-chairman of the all-party football group, I think it very important that we hold that debate, and I sincerely hope that, after quick winding-up speeches, we can move on to it and put the issue we are discussing to one side. I hope—I speak more in hope than in expectation—that I shall never again have to speak in the House on any matters to do with MPs' pensions, pay or expenses.

5.25 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I will be brief because, as the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field) pointed out, we are due to start a debate that is 22 years overdue, and many family members of those who died are here to listen to it.

[Angela Smith]

Three basic principles underlie the topic under discussion. The first and most important is that Members should never again vote on pay and pensions issues. Independent determination of our remuneration and expenses is critical to the integrity of the House. I have always believed that it is invidious that Members are asked to determine their pay and pensions. The same rules should apply to local government and the devolved Assemblies. I absolutely, wholeheartedly agree with the motion, in the sense that it should stop, once and for all, any votes on such issues, although I understand that on at least three occasions we determined never again to vote on them yet have always ended up coming back to them. Let us hope that this is the last time.

The second principle is related and is very much about public confidence in Parliament and its Members. Labour Front Benchers believe that taking the matters we are discussing out of the hands of Members will do a great deal to help restore that confidence, as outlined in the 2009 report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. We voted on that principle in the previous Parliament, and it would be absolutely consistent with that vote to support the motion on passing responsibility for our pension scheme to IPSA.

The third principle is that of parity. It is absolutely critical that Members understand that we are no different from other public sector workers and that we should be no better or worse off than public sector workers when it comes to our pension scheme. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) referred to that point.

We will support the motion and oppose the amendment, because we believe that the principle of parity with public sector workers is of the utmost importance, but it must be understood that we may not entirely support the Government's approach to implementation of the Hutton report. We believe that some of the statements made in the Hutton report are absolutely right, but we do not necessarily support everything the Government are doing to implement it. That is an important distinction to make.

It is also important to re-emphasise the point made by my hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House: there has already been a 1.9% increase in Members' contributions, which was agreed in 2009 as a cost-saving measure. IPSA should also take account of the fact that a Member serves for an average of just 15 years.

I reiterate the importance of consultation. The motion correctly secures the ongoing involvement of the trustees in consultations on changes to the operation of the scheme.

The shadow Leader of the House successfully deconstructed the myth of public sector gold-plated pensions. She restated the often overlooked fact that the average public sector pension is less than £5,600 a year and reminded us of the importance of the Government committing to meaningful negotiations with public sector unions, not going to the negotiating table with predetermined outcomes. I re-emphasise my hon. Friend's point about the Government's use of language, which sometimes seems designed to inflame the situation rather than to resolve the outstanding issues.

Our support for the motion does not in any way stand as an endorsement of the Government's approach to public sector pensions, but because of the principles it outlines we believe that it deserves the support of the House.

5.31 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Heath): I thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) for what she said in support of the motion. She set out the Opposition's position clearly and we are grateful for her comments.

The hon. Lady is right. We ought to emphasise very clearly, first, that MPs' pay, remuneration and pensions should be determined independently—we should not vote on the money we get. I agree with her and with the principles of the legislation, the final part of which we are putting in place today. Secondly, we should say explicitly—this is the crux of the debate—that on pensions MPs should not be in a different position from others in the public sector. We should be treated no better or worse than those whose interests we will be considering and have considered in the past. The public will take a very dim view indeed if, as a parting shot, we try to claim that we are a special case, although there have been some indications, however well wrapped up, that some feel we are a special case.

Intrinsic to that is something that we need to understand across the public sector, which is that these prospective changes do not change accrued benefits: they are not retrospective. In the case of the Members' pension scheme, they cannot be retrospective by statute.

I must pick up one point made by the hon. Lady, which was echoed elsewhere in the Chamber. She said that Members have a relatively limited period of employment in the House, about 15 years, which is reflected in pension contributions. We should recognise that that is slightly longer than the average length of service in the civil service, which is 13.5 years, so our tenure is not below average across the working population. However precarious we might think our position is, there are precarious positions out there as well.

The main argument that we have had this evening is on the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) and supported by the hon. Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) and partially by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field), who expressed some sympathy but felt he would support the motion.

The key point is that they do not wish us to express an opinion on the form in which the independent scheme will be worked out. They feel that that should be left alone entirely and that for the House to express an opinion on the matter pre-empts the decision. I do not think that it pre-empts the decision. I think that it is perfectly proper for the House to take a view. We are statutory consultees on the final schemes that will be independently worked out by IPSA if the motion is passed. Although I think that it is important that we have an opinion, that opinion, which must have some value, will not dictate the final result. I repeat that I do not believe that we should be in a different position from other people in the public sector. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Blaydon nods in support of that contention.

Others fear that we are arguing for exceptionalism. The general secretary of Unite, Len McCluskey, today commented on the amendment:

> "We're not all in this together... While they bay for cuts to public sector pensions, they act to feather their own nests. This will appal ordinary people".

I do not propose to base everything I say on the opinions of Len McCluskey, but I think that many people who do not take an extreme view would nevertheless be very concerned if it appeared that MPs, of their own volition, are to be treated differently from those in other public sector schemes. That is why I am particularly grateful for the support of the shadow Leader of the House for the basic contention.

Mr Chope: Does the Minister trust IPSA? If so, why does he find it necessary to add other words to the motion?

Mr Heath: I trust IPSA to carry out its statutory functions and give an independent assessment, but I think that there is no harm whatsoever in inviting the House to agree that we should not claim an exception for MPs. We claim no such thing and therefore expect IPSA to have regard to Lord Hutton's review and the policy consequences that flow from it.

Mr Anderson: Will the Minister make it very clear for the House, the public and, in particular, Len McCluskey that no Member has argued that MPs should be a special case? Everyone has argued that all public sector workers should be treated equally—that they should also be treated properly.

Mr Heath: I hope that no hon. Member believes that they are a special case and that, if the House divides this evening, they will bear that in mind when casting their votes. I am simply talking about the perceptions that those outside the Chamber might have. I am very clear about what the perceptions would be if Members supported the amendment, which is why I hope it will not be pressed to a Division. That would only divide the House on something on which we ought to be united.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): The House seems pretty much united behind the principle of the motion, but a little concerned about the wording. That leads to the following question: if IPSA were significantly to improve the benefits to Members, would the Government step in to prevent that?

Mr Heath: We would have no power to do so. It is an independent process. If there was any notion that should be done, it would require changes to primary legislation, which would be a matter for the House, not the Government. We can be assured that that is the case.

I wish to put on the record my appreciation of the work that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Mr Donohoe), who chairs the trustees of the parliamentary pension scheme, and his colleagues have done. We are particularly grateful to the hon. Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) and for Watford (Richard Harrington) for stepping down in order to facilitate the transfer. I know that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire takes an active interest and has been engaged in discussions throughout the process. I am particularly grateful for his letter, rather than his comments today, in which he stated: "Overall the trustees are of the view that the transfer of powers to IPSA will give the trustees the opportunity to contribute to the review of your pension scheme that we all know is inevitable in a constructive way." Hear, hear to that. Everyone needs to take account of the caveats he offered, but I do not think that that obstructs the thrust of the motion. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) will not agree with that point, because he does not like IPSA, he does not like all its works and he does not believe that he can trust it. I understand his position, but I invite him to look back at the legislation, which we passed, and accept it.

Mr Donohoe: One very important question has not been answered: when will the order be signed transferring to IPSA the powers to undertake the pension scheme?

Mr Heath: First, we have to accept the result of any vote this evening, but if the motion goes through the order will be made shortly, and the hon. Gentleman should know that that really does mean shortly; it will be not one of those that lasts several months.

I reconfirm for the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) that the Government propose to increase contributions to the ministerial scheme, with staged increases being applied from 1 April 2012, and that we will consult on the proposal, as required by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act. For the avoidance of doubt, I should point out that I do not receive a ministerial salary or pension, so I will not be affected—*[Interruption.]* As the hon. Member for Wallasey says, I do the job for nothing—for my love of the job. I am glad that that is appreciated—*[Interruption.]* She does, too.

On that note of happy consensus, I hope the House will agree the motion and pass the matter to the independent body with the very clear indication that, no, we do not expect to be treated differently simply because we are Members of this House and have the opportunity to express our opinions here in the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Does Mr Chope wish to move his amendment?

Mr Chope: With the leave of the House, I will not seek to move my amendment, because the Government have said that they agree with everything that I and the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) have said, so it seems sensible to move on to the next business as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The question is as on the Order Paper. As many as are of that opinion say Aye—[HON. MEMBERS: "Aye"]—to the contrary No—

Bob Russell: Not content.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The Ayes have it, the Ayes have it.

Resolved,

That this House reasserts its view that the salaries, pensions and expenses scheme for hon. Members ought to be determined independently of this House; accordingly invites the Leader of the House to make an order commencing those provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 which transfer responsibility for the 5 pensions of hon. Members to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA); supports the approach to public service pension reform set out in the Final Report of the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission chaired by Lord Hutton of Furness; believes that IPSA should introduce, by 2015, a new pension scheme for hon. Members which is informed by the Commission's findings and their 10 subsequent application

[Mr Deputy Speaker]

to other public service pension schemes; recognises the case for an increase in pension contributions made in Lord Hutton's interim report; and accordingly invites IPSA to increase contribution rates for hon. Members from 1 April 2012 in line with changes in pension contribution rates for other public service schemes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to the important Back-Bench business on the Hillsborough disaster.

Backbench Business

[HALF DAY]

Hillsborough Disaster

5.42 pm

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I beg to move,

> That this House calls for the full disclosure of all Government-related documents, including Cabinet minutes, relating to the 1989 Hillsborough disaster; requires that such documentation be uncensored and without redaction; and further calls for the families of the 96 and the Hillsborough Independent Panel to have unrestricted access to that information.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting today's debate, following the incredible response to the Government online petition, which attracted 140,000 signatures in just a couple of weeks. It is because those people took the time to push the Government for the release of the Hillsborough documents that today we have the first ever parliamentary debate resulting from an e-petition—although, after a fight for justice which has lasted 22 years, even that minor concession was called into question following last week's shenanigans in the Chamber.

I also thank colleagues for their fantastic support and response: almost 100 MPs from nine separate political parties supported our application to the Backbench Business Committee. This is a victory for democracy and a victory for people power, but it remains to be seen whether it will be a victory for the families. They have been let down so many times that they will not be surprised if there are those who would prefer for this simply to go away. For those who foolishly believe that that might be the outcome of today's debate, let me make it absolutely clear: this issue will never just go away—not until there is justice for the 96.

During this debate, I will set out why I believe it is an important issue for this House to consider, albeit a bit late in the day, and outline why it is essential to press the Government on their commitment to release all papers relating to the Hillsborough disaster. All parts of the House should agree to the terms of the motion, but if they do not I intend to press the House to a vote. My hope is that common sense, and ultimately justice, will prevail.

I want to begin by setting out the context to the disaster, as there is a fundamental misunderstanding of what happened on 15 April 1989 and in the dark days, weeks, years and, ashamedly, decades that followed. There have been only a few occasions in my life when I have been completely overwhelmed by the emotion of the event that I was witnessing—the birth of my three wonderful children, the death of my beloved mum, and the loss of close friends and relatives. However, there is one other event that will live with me for the rest of my life, and that is the tragedy at Sheffield on that beautiful spring day 22 years, six months and two days ago.

Before 1989, Hillsborough was just the name of one of England's famous old football grounds, but for the past two decades the word "Hillsborough" has evoked memories of Britain's worst ever sporting disaster. It was a day when I helplessly watched frantic scenes as people who had travelled to see a football match, some mere children, lay injured and dying as they were pulled from the terraces. I was one of the lucky ones that day, and all my close friends and members of my family returned home, although for one—our Lisa—it was touch and go whether she would survive. Thankfully, she did. This, unfortunately, was not the case for 96 men, women and children who were killed, and for hundreds of others injured and left permanently traumatised. The loss of 96 innocent lives was bad enough, but the tragic nature of their deaths was exacerbated by what happened next. Instead of those at fault taking responsibility for their actions, a co-ordinated campaign began to shift the blame and look for scapegoats. To this day, nobody has been held to account for Hillsborough.

A half-day debate, though welcomed, is not long enough to go into all the details of this gross 22-year injustice, so I will concentrate on the three main pillars of the accusations against Liverpool fans—namely, that thousands turned up late and ticketless, were drunk and aggressive, and broke down a gate, causing a catastrophic crush. Is it any wonder that some people have doubtful and distorted views as to the exact cause of the disaster when misinformation began almost immediately after the players were led off the pitch at 3.6 pm? The BBC and ITV news, that very afternoon, misreported what had occurred, and it is important to understand the effect that this had, as it formed the immediate public perception of Hillsborough. To understand fully what I mean, people will need to suspend their predisposition to believe the Hillsborough myths and listen to tonight's debate with an open mind before jumping to conclusions. However, the faux pas committed in the immediate aftermath, when there was much uncertainty and a degree of confusion, pales into insignificance when one considers the malicious manner in which some sections of the press reported things, which still clouds thinking today.

At 3.15 pm, Graham Kelly, the then chief executive of the Football Association, went to the police control box, where he was told by the now-discredited match commander that Liverpool fans had rushed the gate into the ground, creating the fatal crush in the central pens. This was cowardice and deceit of the highest order, as the fact was that no gate had been rushed and that Duckenfield, the match commander, himself had personally ordered the gate to be opened. That disgraceful lie set the tone for all that came later. At 4.15 pm, Kelly was interviewed by the BBC, and he told them that the police had implied to him that the gate had been broken down by fans to gain access. Notwithstanding the fact that there was absolutely no basis to these lies, Kelly allowed himself to be embroiled in this treachery, although he may simply have wished this version of events to be true, as by then he probably realised that the dysfunctional organisation that he headed up would, quite rightly, be criticised for its part in the unfolding disaster. Why did the FA not listen? I suppose we will never know. Without any evidence to back them up, those lies were reported by some news organisations and the story was flashed across the world as fact, repeating the line that drunken Liverpool fans had forced the gate open.

Just a few days later, before people had even had time to arrange funerals for their loved ones, *The Sun* newspaper infamously printed the banner headline, "The Truth", on the personal instruction of its editor, Kelvin MacKenzie. It claimed that drunken fans had forced the gates open because they did not have match tickets, stolen from the corpses lying around the pitch, assaulted police officers and the emergency services, robbed cameras and other equipment from press photographers, and urinated on police officers who were helping the victims. That was one of the cruellest blows.

It beggars belief that certain sections of the media still give air time to this most despicable man to vent his bile and mendacity. Given what he said about the Prime Minister the other day, even some Tories may now agree that this man is a pariah, as we on Merseyside know him to be. This is a man who preaches about free speech, but who dehumanised the deaths of 96 people for a cheap headline—what an absolute hypocrite!

Months later, the rag that that man edited admitted that the allegations it had made were totally false, but the damage had been done. To this day, the people of Merseyside do not buy that paper. It has taken the hackgate allegations about Murdoch's News International for people at long last to sit up and take notice of the claims that we made 22 years ago and to think that there may be some truth to our allegations of collusion between the press, certain politicians and the police.

The actual loss of life from Hillsborough will never be known. Yes, we know that 96 people died as a direct result of the injuries that they sustained at the stadium, but many have died subsequently. Some have died, tragically, by committing suicide and others have simply died of a broken heart at the loss of their loved ones. However, I have been careful not to base my account of events on emotion. I have ensured that I have clear and referenced evidence to support all my contentions.

It is claimed that truth is the first casualty of war; the same can be said of Hillsborough. Misdirection, obfuscation and damned lies were all used as smokescreens to deflect attention away from the guilty. Institutional complacency and gross negligence, coupled with an establishment cover-up, have added to the sense that there was an orchestrated campaign to shift blame from those who were really responsible on to the shoulders of Liverpool fans. Many myths have been perpetrated about the events of 15 April 1989. Perhaps those will be addressed only when the Hillsborough independent panel, set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), concludes its deliberations and reports back next year. It is important to give the panel all the pieces of the jigsaw so that it can complete a full and accurate picture of events.

So what are the facts about the Hillsborough disaster? I say to those who believe that it was simply caused by fans turning up late, you are wrong. You are wrong. In spite of a misprint on tickets requesting that fans turn up at 2.45 and despite the fact that Liverpool fans had only 23 dilapidated turnstiles through which to enter the ground, while Forest fans had access through 60, half of the 10,100 supporters were already in the ground before 2.30. There was congestion outside and with 5,000 supporters still to enter the ground at 2.30, it was obvious that the kick-off needed to be delayed. Anyone who has ever been to a match knows that there is always a higher entry rate as kick-off time approaches. Two years previously, there had been a delayed kick-off to allow fans to get into the ground, but not this time.

Instead, the response to the build-up in congestion outside was to open a gate and allow fans on to the concourse. That had disastrous consequences as there were no stewards or police officers inside to direct

[Steve Rotheram]

supporters into the half-empty pens and away from the packed central pens. Signage was poor and the design of the Leppings Lane end meant that about 2,000 of that group made their way into the ground and headed straight for a tunnel marked "Standing", which led directly to pens 3 and 4. That influx caused severe crushing and some fans began climbing over the lateral fences into the half-empty pens on either side to escape. It was later estimated that more than 3,000 supporters were admitted to the central pens—almost double the safe capacity. At five minutes past 3, a crash barrier gave way in pen 3, causing people to fall on top of each other. Cries to the police for help were audible, but they went unheard.

Another falsehood is the claim that these were ticketless fans. Even officers at the turnstiles rejected that. The Health and Safety Executive, which later analysed the evidence of everyone who entered at that end, concluded that the total number was between 9,373 and 10,124. The capacity was 10,100. The myth of ticketless fans can therefore also be dispelled. To confirm that and to leave no doubt, the Taylor report stated that there was no substance to the allegation that ticketless fans caused the disaster. Unfortunately, that smear still impairs and prejudices the thinking of some, because they have heard the apocryphal tale of ticketless fans so many times that they believe it to be true. Not only is it untrue; it is total rubbish. It is the sort of nonsense bandied around by those who are desperate to protect their own skins.

And how about the outrageous claims by Bernard Ingham, Mrs Thatcher's press secretary? While the death toll was still rising, he stated that the cause was drunken fans and that Hillsborough would not have happened

"if a mob, clearly tanked up, had not tried to force their way in".

I know that there are people, perhaps even some on the Government Benches, who actually believe that drivel because they have been fed it for two decades. I simply ask people to read the Taylor report. Alcohol was absolutely rejected as the cause of the disaster. Once again, it was a convenient excuse—an expedient opportunity to smear the fans and abrogate responsibility. The Liverpool supporters were no better or worse than any other football fans of the day. The fans of other teams should be saying, "There but for the grace of God go we," because a similar tragedy could have befallen anyone at that time, particularly at that stadium, which did not even have a valid safety certificate. The Taylor report concluded that the great majority of fans

"were not drunk or even the worse for drink".

However, Ingham's view obviously influenced the Sheffield coroner, who inexplicably took blood alcohol levels from every victim, including Jon-Paul Gilhooley. Jon-Paul was 10 years of age—just a child. Drink was not the cause, but it was used to accuse and condemn, to impugn and reproach. It was, quite frankly, a con.

The cause of the Hillsborough disaster is there for all to see in the Taylor report, which concluded that the police fundamentally lost control of the situation and did not demonstrate the leadership expected of senior officers; that the failure to cut off access to pens 3 and 4 was a blunder of the first order; that safety procedures were inadequate and the ground was badly maintained and dangerous; that the fans were routinely treated with contempt by football; and that Liverpool fans had been the victims rather than the guilty party.

Lord Taylor's reports, published in August 1989 and January 1990, dismissed the allegations against Liverpool supporters in relation to the disaster. Twenty-two years on, it is difficult to comprehend the enormity of the complete and utter breakdown of communication, or the inaction, by those charged with our safety. It is impossible to understand at a human level why those in authority simply stood idly by while ordinary football fans, without any emergency or medical training, organised themselves into stretcher-bearing squads to ferry stricken fans on advertising hoardings ripped from around the pitch and tried to give CPR to the stricken.

This was not a war zone. No battle had been fought, but we would not have guessed it from the scenes on the pitch. It was due to the Herculean efforts of ordinary fans—these same fans later besmirched by scandalous tabloid headlines—that the death toll was not even higher.

On the 20th anniversary of the disaster, I put on record my thanks to the ordinary people of Sheffield who opened their doors, in the days before mobile phones, to let fans call home to tell loved ones that they were safe. Tonight, both the leader and chief executive of Liverpool city council send messages of support from the people of Liverpool to those in Sheffield who helped on that dreadful day.

I am proud to be a Liverpudlian. In the 22 years for which the families have fought their dignified campaign, I and the rest of Britain have watched as my great city has come together on this issue. Out of the darkness of the Hillsborough tragedy, an eternal flame of unity has emerged and means that Liverpool is now synonymous with a unique kind of solidarity. Whether red or blue, we are Scousers all. To those who attempt to perpetrate the myth that it was the fault of the fans, I say that I will never tire of reminding them that the ordinary fans were the real heroes on the day, not the villains. They reacted while those in authority froze.

My granddad used to regale me with vivid accounts of the two world wars that he fought in, and while he never glorified in war itself he would explain to us children his sense of loss for fallen comrades, nearly half a century later. I did not really understand that when I was growing up, but I do now. It does not matter how long it takes, we will never stop fighting for justice for the 96.

A botched inquest, a flawed inquiry, a farcical review of evidence and a system that worked against, instead of for, the families, have left a bitter taste. An unsympathetic Government, an unsatisfactory judicial process and an unforgiving press have led observers to believe that an organised conspiracy was acting against the best interests of natural justice. We need the Government to act, and we need this House to support the motion, to ensure that there is no further backsliding on this issue.

The Prime Minister quite rightly apologised for a previous Government's mishandling of events when he responded to the findings of the Saville report. Today, I call on the Prime Minister to make a statement in this House and apologise for the mistakes that were made and the mishandling of this whole tragedy on behalf of a previous Government. I also ask him to join me in pushing for the full disclosure of the senior police officer and the Conservative MP who allegedly leaked the story to the press, and in pressing for a front-page banner headline in *The Sun* newspaper admitting that it lied in April 1989, just as Kenny Dalglish demanded two decades ago.

We in Liverpool refer collectively to those lost at Hillsborough simply as "the 96", but each of the 96 was an individual—a father, sister, brother, daughter, son; an irreplaceable person loved by others and with their own unique life story. "The 96" trips off the tongue far too easily. It is not until we read out each individual name on the Hillsborough memorial at Anfield that we realise just how long the list is. Parliament has never recorded their names in *Hansard* for posterity. Well, tonight, I can at least put one wrong right.

John Alfred Anderson, 62. Colin Mark Ashcroft, 19. James Gary Aspinall, 18. Kester Roger Marcus Ball, 16. Gerard Bernard Patrick Baron, 67. Simon Bell, 17. Barry Sidney Bennett, 26. David John Benson, 22. David William Birtle, 22. Tony Bland, 22. Paul David Brady, 21. Andrew Mark Brookes, 26. Carl Brown, 18. David Steven Brown, 25. Henry Thomas Burke, 47. Peter Andrew Burkett, 24. Paul William Carlile, 19. Raymond Thomas Chapman, 50. Gary Christopher Church, 19. Joseph Clark, 29. Paul Clark, 18. Gary Collins, 22. Stephen Paul Copoc, 20. Tracey Elizabeth Cox, 23. James Philip Delaney, 19. Christopher Barry Devonside, 18. Christopher Edwards, 29. Vincent Michael Fitzsimmons, 34. Thomas Steven Fox, 21. Jon-Paul Gilhooley, 10. Barry Glover, 27. Ian Thomas Glover, 20. Derrick George Godwin, 24. Roy Harry Hamilton, 34. Philip Hammond, 14. Eric Hankin, 33. Gary Harrison, 27. Stephen Francis Harrison, 31. Peter Andrew Harrison, 15. David Hawley, 39. James Robert Hennessy, 29. Paul Anthony Hewitson, 26. Carl Darren Hewitt, 17. Nicholas Michael Hewitt, 16. Sarah Louise Hicks, 19. Victoria Jane Hicks, 15. Gordon Rodney Horn, 20. Arthur Horrocks, 41. Thomas Howard, 39. Thomas Anthony Howard, 14. Eric George Hughes, 42. Alan Johnston, 29. Christine Anne Jones, 27. Gary Philip Jones, 18. Richard Jones, 25. Nicholas Peter Joynes, 27. Anthony Peter Kelly, 29. Michael David Kelly, 38. Carl David Lewis, 18. David William Mather, 19. Brian Christopher Mathews, 38. Francis Joseph McAllister, 27. John McBrien, 18. Marion Hazel McCabe, 21. Joseph Daniel McCarthy, 21. Peter McDonnell, 21. Alan McGlone, 28. Keith McGrath, 17. Paul Brian Murray, 14. Lee Nicol, 14. Stephen Francis O'Neill, 17. Jonathon Owens, 18. William Roy Pemberton, 23. Carl William Rimmer, 21. David George Rimmer, 38. Graham John Roberts, 24. Steven Joseph Robinson, 17. Henry Charles Rogers, 17. Colin Andrew Hugh William Sefton, 23. Inger Shah, 38. Paula Ann Smith, 26. Adam Edward Spearritt, 14. Philip John Steele, 15. David Leonard Thomas, 23. Patrik John Thompson, 35. Peter Reuben Thompson, 30. Stuart Paul William Thompson, 17. Peter Francis Tootle, 21. Christopher James Traynor, 26. Martin Kevin Traynor, 16. Kevin Tyrrell, 15. Colin Wafer, 19. Ian David Whelan, 19. Martin Kenneth Wild, 29. Kevin Daniel Williams, 15. Graham John Wright, 17.

Rest in peace. Justice for the 96. *[Applause.]*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May we have brevity from those on the Front Benches? A lot of Back Benchers want to contribute. This is a very important debate and we have a lot of people in the Gallery who wish to hear it.

6.10 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): May I first commend the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who movingly marked the memory of the 96 who lost their lives in the Hillsborough disaster? He has brought to this House not just the voice of the families of those who were lost on that fateful day, but his personal experience, which I am sure will have an impact on the whole House.

Going to watch a football match is something that brings great joy to hundreds of thousands of British people every weekend, but on that fateful April day in 1989, it brought not joy, but tragedy. Parents and children and brothers and sisters who left their homes that day to watch a football match were never to return.

I have met some of the families of the 96 and heard directly from them about the impact of that terrible day. They have shown nothing but dignity; they have asked for nothing but the truth.

I also want to pay tribute to the support that the whole of the Merseyside community has given in the campaign for the truth. No words from the Government can ever even begin to make up for the loss of 96 cherished lives, but I want to send my deepest condolences to all those affected by the national tragedy of Hillsborough.

Let me say here and now, in this House and on the record, that as Home Secretary, I will do everything in my power to ensure that the families and the public get the truth. As a Government, we fully support the Hillsborough independent panel and the process that the panel is leading to disclose the documents telling the whole story. No Government papers will be withheld from the panel. No attempts to suppress publication will be made. No stone will be left unturned.

The previous Government were right to establish a disclosure process overseen and driven not by the Government, but by an independent panel chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool. I pay tribute to the work of the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton for the work they did to secure the establishment of that panel.

Following my appointment as Home Secretary, I announced the coalition Government's full support for the process. I met the Bishop of Liverpool soon after coming to office so that he could give me an update on progress and so that I could give him my assurance of our support. I have also met the bishop subsequently so that he could keep me informed about the panel's work.

The Hillsborough independent panel has three principal tasks: to oversee the disclosure of the documents to the maximum possible degree, which will initially be to the families; to report on its work, outlining the ways in which the information disclosed adds to the public understanding of the tragedy; and to make recommendations as to a permanent Hillsborough archive.

The principle underlying the process is that of maximum possible disclosure, and of disclosure to the families first and then to the wider public. This is difficult, sensitive and lengthy work, and it cannot be rushed. However, the aims of the process are, I believe, aims we can all agree on, and we should continue to uphold them.

As the Bishop of Liverpool has said, the dignity of the families should be matched by the dignity of this process. The families deserve to be treated with dignity

[Mrs Theresa May]

and respect in the way they receive the information, which brings me on to the reason for this debate.

The reason for this debate and for the motion behind it concerns the Cabinet Office's decision not to disclose papers relating to the disaster in response to a freedom of information request from a BBC reporter. I want to state very clearly that the Government's position has absolutely nothing to do with attempting to suppress the release of those papers or somehow to hide the truth. I am sorry that the way the Government responded to the FOI request caused anxiety among the families and concern on Merseyside and beyond.

The Government firmly believe that the right way to release the papers is through the Hillsborough independent panel—to the families first and then to the public. The families should have the papers, and they should not have them filtered through politicians or the media. We therefore support the Hillsborough independent panel and today's motion. We want full disclosure to the panel of all documents relating to Hillsborough, including Cabinet minutes. Those documents should be uncensored and unredacted. Indeed, the full unredacted Cabinet Office papers on Hillsborough have already been made available to the panel. That includes minutes of the meetings of the Cabinet immediately following the disaster.

As the Prime Minister said in the letter that he sent to the right hon. Member for Leigh:

> "Please let me reassure you that the Government is wholly committed to full disclosure of the Hillsborough information that it holds...As you will be aware, Cabinet papers, along with other relevant government papers, have been released to the Hillsborough independent panel. I am keen to ensure that the panel and indeed the families were treated with the utmost respect in this process. We have therefore proposed that the panel will ensure that disclosure takes place initially to the Hillsborough families, prior to wider publication."

The Government are not seeking to avoid the publication of Cabinet minutes or any other Hillsborough papers. The Cabinet papers on Hillsborough can be published, and the Government will do nothing to prevent the panel from publishing them or indeed whatever it so decides. The panel will release the full picture of what happened at Hillsborough, but in a way that is respectful of the families.

The panel's terms of reference envisage minimal redaction to avoid junior officials' names and addresses being published; to avoid signatures being available for copying; and to ensure that the Data Protection Act is not breached. It might also be necessary to redact sensitive private and personal information specific to the victims. However, it will be the role of the panel to ensure that any redactions are kept to a minimum.

The principle is clear: full publication and minimal redaction, and the panel seeing all of the papers, uncensored and unredacted—as the families have rightly demanded: the whole loaf, not snippets. I stand ready to do anything I can to aid the independent panel in completing its task.

Hillsborough was a terrible tragedy—a tragedy that must never be repeated. As the Bishop of Liverpool has said, the disaster and its aftermath inflicted a deep wound in the body of the Merseyside community which remains to this day. The families of the 96 deserve the truth. That is why we fully support the Hillsborough independent panel; why all Government papers, including Cabinet minutes, have been made available to the panel with no restrictions on access; and why the Government support this motion.

6.18 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): We are here tonight because 139,815 people have asked this House to revisit events 22 years old. They are right, because those events concern one of the biggest injustices of the 20th century. For 22 years, the Hillsborough families faced insults and had obstacles placed in their way at every step as they pursued their dignified campaign for truth and justice.

Recognising that, a call for full disclosure was made on the 20th anniversary. That has gathered momentum ever since, and this summer it was supported by people from all over the country and supporters of all football clubs. That was an incredible statement of solidarity with those families, who have faced a hard and, at times, lonely struggle. However, it did something else: it sent the clearest of messages to everyone in a position of authority that the families have suffered far too much, and that the whole truth about Hillsborough must finally be told.

Tonight, the Home Secretary has made an unequivocal commitment to full disclosure, echoing the words of the Prime Minister in his letter to me. We thank her for that. The fact that there is now agreement between all parties across the House shows the watching world that this is not about party politics but about the fundamental rights of victims and their families. I should also like to thank the Home Secretary for leading the Government's response to the debate tonight. That sends an important signal to the families who have travelled to be here, and to the thousands of others watching closely at home who have been deeply affected by the tragedy. The right hon. Lady might have expected to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) opposite her tonight, but my right hon. Friend has graciously allowed me to respond for the Opposition, given my personal involvement in these matters. I thank her for that.

I want to begin by addressing this simple question: why are almost 140,000 people asking us to do more? There have certainly been other disasters in which concerns have remained long after the event. As with other disasters, there are things about Hillsborough that people will find shocking, such as the fact that the ground did not have a valid safety certificate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) mentioned. But something else makes Hillsborough stand apart. Has there ever been, and will there ever be, another tragedy at which, within minutes, an orchestrated campaign began to blame the victims, their families, friends and fellow supporters? That is precisely what happened there. It is unprecedented in the recent history of our country, and an unbelievable act of brutality against 96 families already suffering unbearable grief. As one bereaved mother said:

> "We soon realised that we weren't only in a fight for justice for those who died but also to clear their names and the names of the fans who lived".

Those are words that no mother in her position should ever have had to say.

The first damaging lie about Hillsborough came even as people lay dying, not long after 3.15, from a senior public servant, the officer in charge on that day. Chief Superintendent Duckenfield told the then chief executive of the Football Association that Liverpool fans had forced gate C, as my hon. Friend said. That was not true; he had given permission for the gate to be opened. Professor Phil Scraton wrote in his brilliant book, "Hillsborough—the Truth":

> "Graham Kelly unwittingly…repeated Duckenfield's lie to the waiting media. Within minutes, it was broadcast to the world: an appalling disaster was happening, and Liverpool fans were to blame."

Sadly for the families, that set the level for what was to follow. Blood alcohol levels were taken from the victims, including children, as they lay dead in the gymnasium at Hillsborough. By today's standards, that is an unthinkable intrusion into the private grief of the families. As the families arrived at Hillsborough later that day to identify loved ones, they were subjected to police questioning as though they, and the deceased, were suspects. In the '80s, the authorities could get away with that type of behaviour—people just had to put up with it—but by today's standards, it is truly shocking.

There was much worse to come, however. Days later, the most sickening lies imaginable were briefed by public servants to newspapers throughout the land. It was a brutal campaign to set public opinion against the supporters and to pre-empt the public inquiry that was to be carried out by Lord Justice Taylor. Let me remind the House that Taylor found that hooliganism played no part in the Hillsborough disaster, and that the main reason for it was the "failure of police control". Yet even today, people talk about Hillsborough in the context of hooliganism. Casual allegations are still made about drunkenness and disorder. The fact that this still happens, 22 years on, is testimony to the power of the poison in those police briefings to the media. It is also clear that efforts were made not only to shape public opinion but to shape the way in which evidence was presented to the inquiries that would follow.

We hope that the House will tonight give the Hillsborough independent panel the full power and authority to tell the whole truth about Hillsborough, but there are already documents in the public domain that provide clear evidence of the efforts that went on to present events in a certain way. I want to share some of them with the House tonight, as they will help to explain to people who perhaps have not followed every detail down the years why so many people still feel so strongly about this, as we do.

In the House of Lords, there are files containing the original personal statements of police officers who witnessed these terrible events at first hand. They are hard to read, so distressing are the scenes they describe. One in particular stands out, and I have it with me this evening. It is the handwritten statement of police constable No. 227 from Woodseats police station. These are his recollections of the crucial moments just after 3 pm on 15 April 15 1989:

> "I realised at that time that a great tragedy had occurred. I began to feel myself being overcome with emotion, but soon realised that I would be of no use to anyone if I felt sorry for myself. I was assisted out of the terracing and onto the pitch. I saw several officers wandering about in a dazed and confused state. Some were crying and some simply sat on the grass. Members of the public were running about with boarding ferrying people from the pitch to the far end of the ground."

PC 227's words evoke the haunting TV images that people were later to see replayed time and again. There can be little doubt of their sincerity, but they are not the only words on the page. Attached to the top right corner of the statement is a note from a senior officer. It reads:

> "Last 2 pages require amending. These are his own feelings. He also states that PCs were sat down crying when the fans were carrying the dead and injured. This shows they were organised and we were not. Have the PC re-write the last 2 pages excluding the points mentioned."

In the cold light of 2011, those are truly shocking words. They go to the heart of the untold story of Hillsborough. The unforgettable words

> "they were organised and we were not"

transport us straight back to a very different time: an era of "them and us", when football supporters were considered to be the "enemy within". It is as though the officer was describing a battle for supremacy between two sides rather than the immediate aftermath of a terrible tragedy.

I do not think that it is widely understood that the personal statements of police officers were collected and amended in that way, outside the normal procedures. That is why the panel's work and its report are so important. They will mean that the rest of the country will finally see what the Hillsborough families were up against, and what they have known for years. PC 227's statement was not the only one that was amended. Many more were, in order to portray events in a certain way, removing references to police failure on the day such as the lack of proper radio communications.

Hillsborough belonged to an entirely different era, predating the Freedom of Information Act, when public bodies held all the power. As a result, it is still not known who was responsible for the efforts to amend statements, the level at which that was endorsed in the South Yorkshire police, and the extent to which the then Government supported the police strategy of blaming the supporters. I say this not to make a political point. This is crucial to understanding how and why the police case against the supporters came to gather such potency, pre-empting the public inquiry.

Another area that I hope will be illuminated by the disclosure process is the 3.15 cut-off imposed by the coroner, and the way in which the inquests were subsequently organised. It is impossible to overstate the significance of this to the families, as the effect of it was to compound earlier injustices that they had faced. It means that they have never had the opportunity properly to test all the evidence and information about their loved ones, or to find out if any more could have been done for them. One of the individuals admitted to hospital recovered, challenging the theory that irreparable damage was done in all cases by 3.15. Indeed, there is medical evidence from one of the doctors who treated victims on that day which was never properly heard. The 3.15 cut-off was cruel. It was also crucial, because it denied the families the right properly to challenge the inaccurate claims that had been put around about their loved ones.

I am setting out these issues this evening because many of them will not be widely known around the country. They explain why the sense of injustice about Hillsborough and its aftermath on Merseyside has never diminished. They were the reason that, together with

[Andy Burnham]

my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) I made the first call for full public disclosure in April 2009, days before the memorial service on the 20th anniversary.

As the Home Secretary said, this led to the establishment of the Hillsborough independent panel, and I appreciate the continued support that she and her Government have provided to that panel's work. At the time it was established there was an unresolved debate within government about whether or not Cabinet minutes and other documents should be published. I have always been of the firm opinion that they should, but because there was no agreement, the terms of reference allow the panel only to view rather than publish the material.

I knew we would have to come back to this issue; that duly happened in the summer when the Information Commissioner ruled on the BBC's freedom of information request. I said then that I believed the commissioner's ruling should have been immediately accepted by the Government and proposals developed to fulfil it, working through the panel with disclosure to families first. I have no doubt that the Government were acting to protect the integrity of the panel and the interests of the families and not—the Home Secretary made this point—to prevent disclosure. As I said in my letter to the Prime Minister, however, the Government's handling of their response to the commissioner risked undermining public trust in the panel and the disclosure process.

The Home Secretary has this evening removed any lingering doubt and put the Government's commitment to full disclosure firmly on the record. We thank her for the clarity of her words, but for the avoidance of doubt, does she agree that there might be a case for issuing the Hillsborough independent panel with updated terms of reference, reflecting the clear will of this House tonight? That might also present an opportunity to set out the Government's position on any redactions to disclosed material. I believe that there should be a clear presumption of no redactions to any material. I am told, and the Home Secretary repeated it, that there might be highly personal medical information that it would be illegal to put in the public domain under the Data Protection Act. If that is the case, may I ask her to ensure that any redactions have the full support of the panel and may I suggest that they be made to any documents only with the agreement and support of the Hillsborough families?

I would like to assure the Home Secretary that the Opposition fully support the Government's policy of handling all disclosures through the panel and making them available to the families first. The Opposition urge both the Information Commissioner and the BBC to accept that as fulfilment of the ruling. Disclosure is important, but it is only part of the panel's crucial work. It has also been asked to make sense of it all, producing a report on how what is disclosed adds to public understanding of the tragedy and its aftermath. That is hugely important. It means that the whole story and its full impact will finally be told. That is why I support the Government's position to release documents not now in a haphazard and unco-ordinated way, but when the whole picture is put together and all the pieces are in place.

I wish to deal now with material held by private bodies and its potential disclosure. It is possible that there are documents and material held by private organisations that will be highly relevant to the work of the Hillsborough independent panel. I understand that Sheffield Wednesday football club and the Football Association have both co-operated with the panel, and I thank them for that.

Clearly, however, there are other private organisations that will have material that might help the panel's work. The first is Hammond Suddards, the solicitors for the South Yorkshire police. It was involved in the preparation of police officers' statements, and, indeed, the amendment of them, and the handling of the inquest. The second is News International. In *The Guardian* today, Margaret Aspinall, chair of the Hillsborough family support group, has called on the company to reveal the sources of the deeply hurtful front page of Wednesday 19 April. It was claimed that Liverpool supporters—my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton mentioned this—pick-pocketed victims, urinated on police officers and attacked an officer giving the kiss of life.

It is important to say that *The Sun* was not the only newspaper to carry inaccurate and deeply hurtful lies. Allegations on the same theme were reported by the *Daily Star*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *Yorkshire Post*, all using unattributed quotes from police and Police Federation sources. Lord Justice Taylor commented in his report on how they were not substantiated by a single witness. For people in public positions to disseminate such offensive untruths certainly breaks professional ethics and is possibly a criminal act. It might have happened 22 years ago, but the pain caused by those lies is still felt today.

Does the Home Secretary share my view that Margaret Aspinall is right to assert the families' right to know who gave those briefings and with what authorisation? I hope she will agree with me that media organisations, and particularly News International, should be approached by the panel and encouraged to hand over any material that might reveal who made these claims. It is my belief that the British public, following the revelations about phone hacking, will see Hillsborough in a new light. That, too, is a story of unacceptable collusion between police and the press, working against the wider public interest, and it, too, must be fully exposed, with those responsible held to account.

In conclusion, 140,000 voices have swept Hillsborough back to the Floor of this House tonight, but we would not be here if it were not for the courage and determination of the families. Soon, they will be able to rest, knowing that they could not possibly have done more for their loved ones. I pay tribute to the Hillsborough family support group—to Trevor Hicks, Phil Hammond and Margaret Aspinall; to Hope for Hillsborough, and to the Hillsborough justice campaign for keeping the flame alive for the 96.

I have not seen the files. I do not know what they will reveal, but I am already clear about one thing—that, after a tragedy on this scale, the denial of families' rights and the denigration of their friends and fellow supporters is a national scandal. When the panel reports, it will require an appropriate national response.

I can remember 15 April 1989 as if it were yesterday. I was at Villa Park for the other FA cup semi-final. Many of my friends were at Hillsborough. Twenty years later, I agonised about whether to attend the memorial service as a Government representative. No issue matters more to me, and I was worried that I would not be able to keep my composure before the Kop, but I also had my own private disappointments that my own Government had not done enough to help those families. I look back on my decision to go as the best decision I have made in my life because the reaction of people on the Kop that day told the rest of the country that there was a deep and unresolved injustice.

That night, I met the families at Liverpool town hall. I promised them full disclosure, that the whole truth would be told. Tonight, to have the entire House united behind them in that call and behind those families is a huge moment. Part of the painful truth of Hillsborough is that none of us, no political party, did enough to help. This time, we must not let them down.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I remind the House that we have an eight-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. I want to ensure that everyone who wants to participate gets in, so any additional brevity during speeches will be welcome.

6.37 pm

Esther McVey (Wirral West) (Con): This debate has been a long time coming. The journey to get here has been a long, painful fight led by the families of the 96 victims, the people of Liverpool, the local papers—the *Liverpool Daily Post* and the *Liverpool Echo*—and football supporters. The support and the quest for answers have not diminished. Instead, they have gathered momentum over time. The family voices have stayed firm; the commitment to loved ones has been unshakeable. Finally, the families are here today to see this debate, so let us make sure that every politician of every party does right by them, allowing them complete access to all material—unedited and unredacted—so that they can understand what happened, and have answers and closure, perhaps a little peace, but most of all so that they can have some truth about what happened on 15 April 1989.

People say Liverpool is a close-knit community, but it is so much more than that. It is an extended family, and it is the compassion and the passion of the people of Liverpool that have supported the families in striving for the truth. When people talk of Hillsborough, they speak as though everyone from the city knew somebody there that day, and in a way they did. My cousins were there—safe, yes, but when a call came to the crowd, asking whether any police, medical staff or officers could come and help, my cousin stepped forward. He was one of those people, one of the fans asked to help the injured and to identify people. It was that help that was so cruelly and inaccurately misrepresented in the tabloids.

The Prime Minister accepted that the Hillsborough tragedy and its aftermath has left a deep wound on Merseyside. He has given an unqualified commitment to full disclosure of files relating to what happened. He agreed to this before today's debate, but I still believe it is important that we are all here today, that this tragedy is given the importance it deserves and that voice is given to the 145,000 e-petitioners who voted in favour of today's debate in the House. They want full disclosure, and they want all the families to have the final, ultimate say in what happens to the information.

An independent panel of experts, academics and archivists, headed by the Right Rev. James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool, has been appointed to oversee and make sense of the volume of documents. The families—those who have suffered most—must now be supported by the panel and by Government.

The political journey has come full circle. In too many instances, questions have been ducked. It has taken 22 years, and I want to be part of a Parliament and a Government who do right by the families who have carried so much pain for so long.

Let me close my speech by saying that it is time for words to come to an end. It is time for action. It is time to release all those documents in their entirety.

6.40 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Let me first say a big thank you to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). I was at the 20th anniversary commemoration service at Anfield, and I know that that was a very emotional occasion for my right hon. Friend. I think that he felt the rawness tenfold—knowing how the families, Liverpool fans and others felt about an injustice that has continued for over 22 years—and I think that he did well to get through his speech and deliver his message on that day. I want to record my thanks for what he did, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle). As I have said, it was an emotional occasion. There were 30,000 people in the stadium that day. I have been going to such commemoration services for many years, but that occasion demonstrated the depth of support for the families, and for the securing of the truth and justice that we all seek.

I was present at the Hillsborough disaster. I drove to the ground that day with three friends. As was recalled by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), it was a beautiful sunny day, and we were looking forward to a good match—one of many good matches that we had seen as Liverpool supporters. One could never have imagined how the event would end. As we approached the stadium we sensed that something was wrong, and indeed the chaos had already started outside the Leppings Lane end. We witnessed mounting chaos around the turnstiles. When we eventually managed to pass through them, our tickets were not checked. There was no organisation and no policing. As I have said, it was complete chaos.

I watched the disaster. I was in the north stand, and my three friends were at the Leppings Lane end. I felt somewhat let down because I did not have a ticket for Leppings Lane. I would normally stand up in the Liverpool Kop, but for some reason I had ended up with a stand ticket, which meant sitting down, and I felt that I had lost out. Of course I did not know what was about to happen, and I did not know what had happened to my three friends in Leppings Lane until some time later.

As I have said, I watched the whole horror of the disaster unfold in front of me. It was obvious well before 3 pm that pens 3 and 4, the middle pens, were full, but on either side of them the stand was empty. I will not go into the details, because we have been through them back in 1998 and since, but it beggars belief that the police and those responsible could not see what was happening. It had to be seen to be believed. Then, of course, we saw the disaster unfold.

[Derek Twigg]

The horror of that day will always live with me, but I did not lose my life, and nor did anyone personally known to me. The families, however, are in a completely different position. I recognise the dignified and determined way in which they have pursued their fight for justice, in spite of the terrible slur perpetrated by the police, with the help of certain sections of the press, in blaming Liverpool supporters for the disaster. Those families have my deepest respect. It is their love for their loved ones, and their burning desire to put a wrong right, that have kept them going for 22 years. Imagine 22 years of fighting this! It is quite unbelievable—but they still have the energy and drive to see this through. One person could not be here tonight. He said that he was tired and would not be here: he wanted to save his energy, so that he could see the conclusion of the campaign and see that justice was done.

Imagine finding out that your loved one had died in that terrible disaster, or been badly injured, and reading or hearing shortly afterwards that that person and his fellow supporters were being blamed for it. It is almost unimaginable that, notwithstanding the grief and trauma that those families were going through, those reports should unfold in the next few days. As has been said, several newspapers were involved, but I think that a headline in *The Sun* caused the most distress and upset. It is difficult for those who were not personally affected to appreciate the impact of that headline. The fact that police officers were involved as well was disgraceful. The distress caused by all that cannot be overstated.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh said, the 3.15 pm cut-off point is crucial, because nothing that happened after that time was taken into consideration. We know that people were alive then, and, as my right hon. Friend made clear, that is an issue for some of the families. It was an unbelievable decision. Dozens of ambulances were not allowed into the stadium, and it was also unbelievable that that was allowed to happen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton pointed out, it was Liverpool supporters who led the rescue mission, if I can call it that, carrying bodies and injured people away from Leppings Lane outside the ground.

I welcomed the Home Secretary's statement about the independent panel. There was some discussion about the establishment of the panel, and there was a good deal of mistrust among the families because of all that had happened previously, but they went along with the process and became involved in detailed negotiations with the Government. I was asked by Liverpool and Merseyside Members of Parliament to represent them in those negotiations, which required considerable hard work. The panel's primary aim is to ensure the recording and orderly release of the documents, which—this is crucial—must be shown to the families first. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh knows, we managed to ensure that the production of a report was included in the agreement. That report will be crucial to the process of putting the truth in the public domain, and enhancing our understanding of the events and information relating to the disaster.

I welcome the Prime Minister's unequivocal commitment to full disclosure, but will the Minister confirm that it will include the advice on which the Director of Public Prosecutions based his decision not to prosecute any senior police officers? Will it also include the reasons for moving an experienced match commander, Chief Superintendent Mole, a few weeks before the semi-final and replacing him with Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield, who was relatively inexperienced in the policing of football matches?

I think it important for Ministers, and the Government generally, to tread carefully, because there have been some problems. I know that what the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport said about hooliganism was taken out of context, but the fact remains that it caused a great deal of distress to the families. Moreover, last week's debacle involving the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) almost scuppered tonight's debate. We need careful planning and thinking about how this matter should be dealt with from now on.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As the hon. Gentleman has referred to comments that I made, may I take this opportunity to apologise to the House—as I have to the families—for those comments? What I said was sloppily worded, it caused great offence, and I hugely regret it. The families were incredibly generous in accepting the apology that I made to them.

Derek Twigg: I know that the Secretary of State did not mean his remarks in the sense in which they were portrayed. I gave that example, along with last week's, to emphasise that all this must be dealt with sensitively. The families have been through so much, and sometimes things have been wrongly said, have not been done or have been glibly avoided.

I want to put on record my thanks to the people of Sheffield. What lives with me is the memory of queues of supporters outside residents' houses—and I mean queues: not two or three people, but 10, 20 or 30—who were allowed to use those residents' telephones to let their families know that they were OK, and were given cups of tea. That was tremendous. The contribution and support of the people of Sheffield should be on record, and is one of the images that live with me to this day as I recall walking back from the ground. We want justice for the 96, and we want to make sure that all this information is released and that the families can see it first; that is crucial. We also want the Government to consider very carefully the report that will be produced, and to respond in a positive way that ensures that the families know both that everything possible has been done to get the information out and that their fight has not been in vain.

6.50 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I begin by congratulating, on behalf of, I think, all of us here today, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram). None of us can hope to match his eloquence, passion, persistence and, frankly, the raw emotion he has displayed today. I first knew him as a very effective mayor of Liverpool city council, and he has today proved to be a very effective champion of his area and of Merseyside as a whole. I want to thank him for associating me with his efforts in making the all-party applications; this has been an all-party endeavour. I also want to mention the hon. Gentleman's predecessor, Peter Kilfoyle. Even though he was a lifelong Evertonian, he did a lot of work for this cause in the House.

I should declare an interest. I am a Liverpool FC supporter. My entire family came from Liverpool, and I grew up there, although I had the misfortune originally, as a child in a city that was oozing football success, to be taken every Saturday to Knotty Ash to watch our one and only rugby league team get beaten repeatedly week after week—thereby amply preparing me for life as a Liberal.

I think I understand the Liverpool character as well as most. A history that has often been quite brutal has endowed that character with two marked traits. The first is a profound emphasis on social solidarity. People have learned to depend on each other—on family and neighbourhood. That was beautifully summed up by Bill Shankly in the following quote, of which I have a copy in my office:

> "the only way to live and to be truly successful is by collective effort, with everyone working for each other, everyone helping each other, and everyone having a share of the rewards at the end of the day."

The second major trait has also been forged by a hard history. It is a lack of reverence—a suspicion and questioning of authority and all the pomposity and cant that often underpins it. That is the reason why Liverpool produces so many comedians. It is a feeling that the world is not necessarily on our side—and, indeed, often it is not, especially for those who spend their time questioning authority, and the pomposity and the cant underpinning it.

Hillsborough was a terrible tragedy for Liverpool. At the time I was a councillor in Sefton, and we outside the immediate Liverpool area lost many people. Afterwards, there was an opportunity to show that things could be different, but what happened? As expected, there was a massive, deeply impressive show of solidarity, and it continues, confirming that this is the city where the way forward is not "walking alone" and where social solidarity is important. The people were, however, let down by the powers that be: the national media, including *The Sun*, about which much has been said today; those in the legal system, about which we have not said as much as we ought to have done; and the police—we have mentioned Duckenfield—who tried to shift blame. Some—but not all—of them perpetuated, relied on or were diverted by prejudices, not just about football supporters but specifically about Liverpool football supporters. That was the case both knowingly and, sometimes, unknowingly, and explicitly and implicitly. Unsurprisingly therefore, there has been no closure. Not only the narrative of what happened but of how different people told—or tried to tell in order to fix—that narrative has never been fully before us.

I genuinely believe that we get better inquiries and inquests if the people running them are prepared to look at their limitations and flaws. We get better reporting if the media at least acknowledge their failings. We also get better policing if the police openly account for their wrongdoing and the error in their own ranks. Truthfulness at all levels is the path to improvement.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman may be aware that I lost a close friend, David Hawley, in the Hillsborough tragedy. I have something to say about the fact that someone in the media, Kelvin MacKenzie, said what he said and then repeated it. The general public have severe doubts about whether the press should allow such people to continue to follow their profession. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that special attention should be given to dealing with journalists who do these sorts of things?

John Pugh: I am aware from books written on this topic that certain people in the offices of *The Sun* questioned Kelvin MacKenzie about his decision on that day.

Liverpool people are not stupid; they know there are good and, sometimes, not so good men in all uniforms. They know that judges are likely to spend more time at Twickenham than on the football terraces so do not necessarily have adequate knowledge of the latter. They know that lawyers can be, and have been, both cynical and noble in addressing this issue. They know that football supporters also come in all shapes and sizes, and that everyone has their prejudices. The antidote to all that, however, is not reports and procedures; rather, it is a single-minded pursuit of the truth. The antidote is not a narrative that suits one or another group or institution, or even one that allows all interests to make peace.

Liverpudlian John Lennon's song "Gimme some Truth" puts this point most simply. One verse—I am unsure whether it applies to any Member who is present—states:

"I'm sick and tired of hearing things
From uptight, short-sighted, narrow-minded hypocrites
All I want is the truth
Just gimme some truth".

The full truth will not necessarily make everything right again. The horror that was Hillsborough will recede in time, even though for some it is, of course, relived every day. However, we owe it to them and the victims to ensure that what passes into history is not a myth or a convenient narrative, but is, so far as is humanly possible, the true and full account of the events.

6.56 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on securing, along with others, this debate and on the manner in which he opened it. It is an important part of the long and determined campaign to secure truth and justice for the 96, and it is a crucial step in the effort to secure the release of further important information. From the beginning, when this horrendous tragedy occurred, truth has been withheld. Tonight, we have heard that there was a police briefing to mislead the public by deliberately distorting the facts, and to do so by promulgating the grotesque untruth that Liverpool fans were responsible for the tragedy on that dreadful day.

Lord Taylor's report was a full judicial inquiry into what happened and it made it clear that the major cause was police failure on the day and that that should be considered against the backdrop of the failure to deal with public safety—there was the astonishing discovery that no safety certificate had been issued at Hillsborough—and the failure to have and implement an emergency plan to deal with any public disaster. As we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), evidence has also come to light—from documents revealed as a consequence of the scrutiny undertaken by Lord Justice Stuart-Smith—that the original police eyewitness statements describing what they saw at the time were later changed by their seniors.

[Mrs Louise Ellman]

There have been further disclosures showing further withholding of essential information. The coroner's decision to have a 3.15 pm cut-off on the assumption that all deaths would have occurred by then resulted in vital information being withheld, and major concerns were raised about the conduct of the inquest and mini-inquests.

When discussing this issue, it should always be remembered that nobody has been brought to account. The Director of Public Prosecutions in 1990 decided that the tragedies arose from "accidental" deaths and he stated that there was no evidence to prosecute any corporate body and insufficient evidence to prosecute individuals. Two police officers were named as culpable, but they both retired before any disciplinary action could be taken.

Recognition of the need for urgent disclosure lay behind the important decision of December 2009 to set up the independent panel chaired by the highly respected and trusted Bishop of Liverpool, the Right Rev. James Jones. The fundamental principle of that panel was the

> "full disclosure of documentation and no redaction of content, except in the limited legal and other circumstances outlined in"

a full terms of reference and

> "disclosure protocol."

Today's debate goes a little further than that. It seeks full disclosure, including of what specific briefing might have been given to the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, when she visited Hillsborough the day after the disaster. The motion also calls for the release of Cabinet papers that discussed the tragedy. I fully support the primacy of the panel and the families, which has been mentioned by the Home Secretary tonight. However, I would like to know how she views the importance of that primacy in relation to the terms of reference already stated and to her commitment that there would be full disclosure and that the Government would not attempt to prevent the publication of anything that the panel and the families wanted to be disclosed.

The Hillsborough tragedy killed 96 people and has had a profound effect on families and on the community. Lost lives cannot be regained, but the bereaved families have waited too long for the full truth. They deserve no less than the truth, and the correct decision today, together with the Home Secretary's statement, can take us all a lot nearer to achieving that.

7.1 pm

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): For the families of all those who tragically lost their lives on 15 April 1989 and all those still traumatised by the events that unfolded before them that day, today is another milestone in their arduous pursuit of justice. I commend the solidarity shown by all who have enabled this debate to take place. Their quest for truth must not be hindered any longer.

As the Member of Parliament for the City of Chester, a city with close ties to our neighbours on Merseyside, I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the residents of my constituency whose lives were irreversibly changed by the tragic events in Sheffield 22 years ago. Many people from Chester were at Hillsborough that day and there are many heartbreaking stories and memories. One of the stories is that of the Rogers family. Seventeen-year-old Henry Rogers and his 19-year-old brother Adam were both at Hillsborough. Henry died in the disaster and Adam, who survived the crush, died just six months later after falling into a hyperglycaemic coma as a result of diabetes. Their parents, Steve and Ronnie, whom I have known for about 10 years due to their tireless involvement in the local community in Chester, recall how Adam was unable to talk about what happened in the months following his brother's death. Although it was diabetes that took their eldest son from them, Steve and Ronnie maintain that Adam died of a broken heart. For the Rogers family, who are members of the Hillsborough family support group, and the hundreds more affected by Hillsborough, questions surrounding the deaths of their loved ones have remained unanswered for 22 years.

A second constituent, Mrs Ann Williams, who is watching this debate from the Gallery, lost her 15-year-old son, Kevin. Mrs Williams has campaigned tirelessly to discover the truth surrounding her son's death and is patron of the Hope For Hillsborough charity and campaign group. Like those of many others, Mrs Williams' campaigns have centred on the decision taken by the coroner, Dr Stefan Popper, to pronounce that all the victims of the disaster had died by 3.15 pm from compressive asphyxia. However, witness statements at the time highlighted the fact that Kevin was still showing signs of life at 3.55 pm, calling out for his mother. Many families of the victims are still angry at the 3.15 pm cut-off point, which meant that the inquest was unable to consider the response of the police and the other emergency services after that time. Having had three requests to the Attorney-General for a new inquest into Kevin's death refused, Mrs Williams submitted her case to the European Court of Human Rights, but in 2009 that attempt was scuppered by the Court, which declared that her application should have been lodged within six months of Lord Justice Stuart-Smith's scrutiny in 1997. Like so many others, Mrs Williams hopes that the release of the papers will cast new light on the events that truly occurred before, during, and after Kevin's death.

This is not the first time Kevin Williams has been mentioned in the House; an Adjournment debate entitled simply "Kevin Williams" was held on 26 October 1994, in which the former Member for Crosby, Sir Malcolm Thornton, said:

> "It was inevitable that judgments would be made on the spot which perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight and of considering the matter after some years had passed, should not and certainly would not have been made. But what is there to hide?"—[*Official Report*, 26 October 1994; Vol. 248, c. 978.]

Seventeen years after Sir Malcolm asked that question, and 22 years after Kevin's death, we still do not know the answer. What is there to hide? It is now time for that question to be answered.

We are united in this House in recognising that all the papers must be released, but the manner in which they are released is of equal importance. A drip-drip release of information is dreaded by many of the victims' families, who fear that snippets of selected information will hit the headlines, creating a feeding frenzy in the press and potentially distorting the overall picture that the release of papers is intended to piece together. The Hillsborough independent panel, chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, is the only legitimate vehicle through which this information should be initially released.

A large quantity of the information will be extremely sensitive, as it details the deaths of many families' loved ones, so the families must be allowed to make sense of the information before it is released to the general public. Furthermore, a conscious effort must be made by the independent panel to include all the families in the process. With a number of different groups supporting the families of those affected, including the Hillsborough family support group, the Hillsborough justice campaign, and Hope for Hillsborough, I would like to stress the importance of ensuring that all the families are kept informed of the progress of the independent panel and of the disclosure of the panel's findings. We must not allow the families to experience any more unnecessary anguish, and we must grant them the dignity that they so rightly deserve.

To that end, I support the Government's position on the BBC's freedom of information request, which could lead to the Cabinet papers bypassing the independent panel and being released immediately. The BBC submitted the FOI request with the best of intentions, but now that the Cabinet Office has recognised the overriding public interest in releasing all the papers to the panel, the BBC should recognise that its FOI request has achieved its objective and that the documents should be released only through the independent panel.

As I have said, the events of that fateful day in the spring of 1989 have lived long in the memories of those who so sadly lost their loved ones—they will never be forgotten. Although the release of the information contained among the mountain of unpublished papers is undoubtedly in the public interest, the interests of the families and survivors of Hillsborough are now the most pressing concern. For their sake alone, clarity is of the utmost importance. I believe that that can be achieved only by allowing the Hillsborough independent panel to conduct its investigation. Once the families have been given the opportunity to digest the panel's final report, and only then, the documents must be widely and publicly disclosed.

7.8 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on his superb effort in securing this debate and on his incredibly powerful opening speech. I also wish to thank the 140,000 people who signed the e-petition, which so strengthened my hon. Friend's hand when he attended the Backbench Business Committee to argue for time to have this debate on the Floor of the House.

This subject is of massive importance to my constituents, to Liverpool football fans, to football fans generally, to the city of Liverpool and to Merseyside as a whole, as shown by the fact that all the Merseyside MPs supported my hon. Friend's proposal that time be found, on a votable motion on the Floor of the House, to consider the full disclosure to Hillsborough families, unredacted and uncensored, of all Government-related documents, including Cabinet minutes. The release is a matter of enormous importance to the bereaved families of the 96 people whose deaths were caused on that day and to the survivors of the disaster.

I was one of two Ministers who called for full disclosure and publication of all existing documentation relating to the Hillsborough disaster on the 20th anniversary of the tragedy in 2009, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). The incredible show of solidarity and dignity at the Anfield memorial, which I also attended that year, as well as the chants for justice that interrupted my right hon. Friend's speech on that occasion, led to the establishment of the Hillsborough independent panel. To achieve that, my right hon. Friend and I were able to push behind the scenes in government to overcome some obstacles in Whitehall, although in my view the terms of reference leave a little to be desired. I hope the process, ably led by the Bishop of Liverpool, who knows what a dark shadow the tragedy still casts across the city, will finally bring everything that can now be known and every document that now exists, 22 years after the event, into the public domain, unredacted by officialdom.

I thank the Home Secretary for her positive and clear commitment to full disclosure this evening. The Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister have agreed to the release of all documents and it is of enormous importance that Parliament should vote to call for unredacted and uncensored release and publication of all Government papers, including Cabinet minutes and papers.

I believe that the Hillsborough disaster and the circumstances surrounding it are a unique case that justifies unique action. Let me briefly set out why. The Hillsborough disaster was not an accident. It could and should have been avoided. It was caused by a failure of police control: that was the finding of Lord Justice Taylor in his interim report just four months after the disaster. Why, then, do so many people still talk of hooliganism?

South Yorkshire police failed spectacularly in their duty on 15 April 1989, but rather than admit it they spent years trying to blame the Liverpool fans who attended the match and the victims for what had happened. That was an orchestrated, sustained and deliberate campaign to blacken the names of the victims and of Liverpool supporters who attended on that day to enable South Yorkshire police to evade their responsibility. As a consequence, the Hillsborough families have had to endure one of the most disgraceful campaigns of official skulduggery, hostility and lies of any victims' families whom I know. It began on the day of the tragedy and continued for years and even now it has left families feeling understandably distrustful and suspicious of officialdom.

South Yorkshire police's failure to accept responsibility and their ongoing efforts to deflect blame, which lasted for years after Taylor's verdict, mean that there are huge amounts of misinformation, which the families keep having to correct. Twenty-two years after the event, the families should not still be having to defend their relatives who died from the lies and innuendo that appear every time the disaster is discussed in the public arena. It is as well to remember that one of the first things that senior officers in charge on that day did was lie about why the gates at Leppings Lane were opened, in order to cover up their culpability.

Inexcusable police behaviour continued on that day. Police refused to allow ambulances that might have saved lives into the ground because they were treating it like a riot, not a disaster. They treated families who arrived on the scene to look for missing relatives as if they were criminals. They blood-tested the dead for alcohol—even children—but there was worse to come. South Yorkshire police briefed *The Sun* that the victims had caused the crush and that fans who merely sought

[Maria Eagle]

to assist the injured and dying were stealing from them and urinating on them—vile and untrue smears that heaped appalling distress on top of unbearable sudden bereavement. It is about time we knew who gave those stories to *The Sun* and I join the families today in calling on News International to tell us.

As if that were not enough, South Yorkshire police quickly established what I referred to in a debate in this House in 1998 as a "black propaganda" unit, which systematically set about altering police statements in an attempt to influence Lord Justice Taylor's inquiry into the causes of the disaster. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh read from one of them; I have read them all. This was no less than a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. One cannot read all the statements, amended, unamended and annotated by police lawyers and police, and come to any other conclusion. It failed mainly—and really only—because they did not have time to complete the job and unamended statements were sent to Taylor. Taylor then gave his finding, but instead of taking notice of Lord Justice Taylor's clear finding and his equally clear rebuke, South Yorkshire police kept the black propaganda unit in place and simply set about persuading the South Yorkshire coroner of their story, preferring to try to engineer historical revisionism rather than to face up to the fact that they were at fault and found to be at fault by the Taylor inquiry.

Despite all that disgraceful behaviour, the chief constable did not resign. The two senior officers in charge on that day were retired on medical grounds and with large pensions to avoid their having to face disciplinary action. No one responsible has ever had to account for the loss of control on that day or for the extended quite despicable behaviour that followed for years thereafter. Indeed, one member of that black propaganda unit, responsible for the smears, is a serving chief constable to this day: Sir Norman Bettison. No wonder the families are suspicious of officialdom, no wonder they do not ever quite believe that what they are told will happen will happen and no wonder they want Parliament to support them by voting for them to see all documents unredacted and uncensored. I believe that a vote in this House for full publication will strengthen the hand of the Hillsborough independent panel in any discussions that it might need to hold with the Government about ultimate publication of all the material produced to it.

Although prompted by the Government's reaction to the Information Commissioner's ruling that Cabinet minutes should be produced, this important debate will allow Parliament to make its views clear, on a votable motion, about what it expects to be disclosed. Parliamentarians should take the chance to say clearly: we are with the families, who must see everything, and there must be no more suspicions of sinister official manoeuvring to prevent the full truth of the disaster from coming out, as there has been too much of that. That is all the families want and we must help them to get it by voting in favour of this motion.

7.16 pm

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I congratulate those who have campaigned so effectively to secure this debate. Specifically, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who has been a feisty campaigner on this issue. I know that many of my constituents are grateful for his efforts, as am I. I also pay tribute to the families of the 96 who have made the journey down today.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and I am particularly anxious to do so for several reasons. First, I am a passionate football fan. I am a lifelong Manchester United supporter and a former season ticket holder, and I have gone to watch a huge number of games in my lifetime. I have stood on windswept terraces, inside the so-called "cages", and I have seen at first hand some of the appalling crowd management by both police and ground staff at stadiums. To my mind, this really was the definition of a disaster waiting to happen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton said, there but for the grace of God go I.

Since the tragedy at Hillsborough, we have come a long way, with all-seater stadiums, greater police planning and much smarter ground management and layout. Clubs have also taken on much more responsibility and have recognised their duty to improve safety. It is vital, however, that we learn all the lessons and get all the facts so that we avoid such appalling tragedies happening again. I still go to watch Manchester United as often as I can and now my children are starting to get old enough to come with me. I want to ensure that we have learned the lessons of Hillsborough so that my children will be able to enjoy the unique magic of match day in the safest possible environment.

The second reason I am so keen to speak is that I have been contacted by a large number of constituents who have urged me to support the campaign to release all documents. I am the only Member of either coalition party to represent a seat on the Mersey estuary. A substantial proportion of my constituents, especially those living in Runcorn, are originally from Liverpool, or, at the very least, their parents are from Liverpool. Many are die-hard Liverpool fans. Many have friends or family who were affected by the tragedy and they want to make certain that the full facts are made available so that bereaved families get the full picture and we can fully understand what happened.

I share the wishes of my constituents and I want to see the papers released. I am pleased that the Government have restated their commitment to full transparency and are happy for the papers to be released as soon as the Hillsborough independent panel decides to do so in consultation with the bereaved families. Given that Cabinet records are normally withheld for 30 years, I think that shows the Government's real dedication to openness in this case and their willingness to help resolve any unanswered questions. I also agree with Margaret Aspinall, chairman of the Hillsborough family support group, that it is right that the papers are shared first with the families before being released to the wider public.

Although it is important that the documents are released, they are only a small part of the truth about Hillsborough. It is essential that the Hillsborough independent panel, which is expected to examine up to 2 million documents as part of its extremely important work, considers all the facts. We must recognise that that is no easy task and we should be patient, but we need to have the truth. I look forward to the panel's eventual report and to the release of the Cabinet papers. I remember that fateful day in April 1989 as though it were yesterday and I hope that I never see such a tragedy again.

7.20 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Every weekend, hundreds of thousands of people attend public events, including many sporting events. They leave their homes in the not-unreasonable expectation that those who are responsible for the management and safety of those events will do their jobs professionally, thoroughly and properly, and that all the experience available will be brought to bear in those situations. What they do not expect is that if something does go wrong, as things do occasionally at events, any victims will be turned into villains. At the heart of the continuing problem that the families, I and many Members have about what happened at Hillsborough is that that is exactly what happened—there was an attempt to turn the people who were victims, in the ways described by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), into villains.

My hon. Friend spoke movingly and eloquently, and I think that he spoke for the whole House. His speech was thorough and covered all the events, problems and things that have gone wrong since, but what he did by reading out the names of the victims was to bring things back to the human scale. I want to do that now by mentioning two people who were constituents of mine at the time—they have since moved—Mr and Mrs Joynes. They lost a son, Nicholas, who has been named by my hon. Friend, and I had a lot to do with them in the early years after the tragedy occurred. They would not want to be seen as being any different from any of the other families concerned, but I single them out because they typify the dignity with which people have responded to the loss of loved ones.

I mention Mr and Mrs Joynes because it was at their request that I attended a day of the inquest hearings, at which I was appalled. It was clear from the way those mini inquests were handled that the whole event seemed to be geared up to proving how much or little alcohol was in the blood of those who had been killed in that tragic and awful disaster. I note that there is a whole debate to be had about mini inquests, but it might be best to have that debate on another occasion. Is it any surprise that those people who had lost loved members of their families at Hillsborough were offended when, on top of the attempts to turn the victims into villains, they found that the inquest, which was supposed to be about establishing cause of death—nothing more than that—seemed to be a perpetuation of that calumny?

Maria Eagle: It was.

Mr Howarth: Indeed—it was.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on the role they have played in bringing about the release of all these documents, and I welcome, I think, the statement that the Home Secretary made today. As I understand it, she has said that all documents, including Cabinet minutes, will be made available and that nothing will be withheld from the glare of public scrutiny. If that is what she was saying, I very much welcome that. I followed her comments carefully and that appears to be what she said.

I want to make a slight qualification about the process of redaction. The Home Secretary will be aware that, wearing another hat, I sit on the Intelligence and Security Committee. When we produce annual reports or any other kind of report we use the process of redaction, which is necessary because issues of national security are sometimes involved. However, I am aware that redaction causes suspicion. What is left out gives the media vent to speculate about what might have been in there. In this particular case, the families who want to know everything, and rightly so, might feel that something has been excluded. The point I want to make to the Home Secretary is that more thought needs to be given to how that process is to be conducted, who is to be involved in it and who will have the final veto. The default position should be to have no use of redaction unless there are issues of personal medical evidence or of data protection to consider. Data protection should not be used to protect those who may have been culpable of failing in their duties, but other issues of data protection, including in relation to the families themselves, might be relevant. There should be redaction only in those circumstances, and even then each decision should be open to question by the families and the independent panel.

Mrs May: It might be helpful if I clarify these issues and respond to the points that the right hon. Gentleman has made. As far as Government papers are concerned, there will be no redaction by Government. Those papers will be available to the independent panel and it will be up to the panel to decide whether there should be any redaction. Having spoken to the panel I know that its view is that redaction should be minimal, but it will wish to discuss with the families the possible redaction of some personal information relating to the victims. I hope that everybody making papers available to the panel will follow the Government's lead in ensuring that there is no redaction in those papers.

Mr Howarth: I am very grateful to the Home Secretary for that clarification, but I still make the point on redaction that there needs to be some thought about how those three different groups, including the Government, will handle that process. I welcome the fact that she said, I think, that the default position should be to publish rather than redact and I hope that that process prevails.

I shall conclude now because I know that many others want to speak. The most important thing for those who have lost loved ones is that light should be shone into all the dark corners that so far have not been revealed, and I hope that the process will do that. I know that nothing can bring comfort in bereavement, particularly given that so many of those who died were so young, but I hope that families will at least feel vindicated in having defended the reputation of their family members and of those who were, collectively, so badly smeared at the time.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. Given the time we have for this debate and the number of Members who have indicated that they wish to speak, I am going to change the time limit on Back-Bench contributions to 12 minutes, starting with the next speaker. I think that will balance the debate for us.

7.29 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): I rise to speak in this debate with a heavy heart but delighted that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) was able to secure it. I was proud to put my name to support the Backbench Business Committee and to the motion today.

The hon. Gentleman's was a very moving and powerful speech. I am sure that I am not the only one who felt myself go, and I commend him for his composure when he bravely delivered the names of the 96 people who died either on that day or later. He voiced the anger, the frustration and perhaps the hope as well of many Liverpool fans and families, not just the fans from Liverpool and Merseyside, but those from across the country and, indeed, from around the world.

We all know that warm words will never bring back those 96 people. However, I hope that warm words and the clear actions that will result from the motion today will bring some comfort to those people who agonised on 15 April 1989. It was not one of those things where someone had to be there to understand how it affected people, particularly in Liverpool. We have heard compelling eye-witness commentaries today from the hon. Members for Halton (Derek Twigg) and, indeed, for Liverpool, Walton. I remember that it hit home at the school assembly on the Monday morning, when we were asked to pray for someone who had died who was a pupil at our school. That, again, twisted the knife ever further, and I did not even particularly know that person.

I intend to try to keep my comments short, so I will not mention all the contributions that have been made, but I thank the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who spoke so eloquently as well. I am unusual perhaps in being a red in the Coffey family—the rest of them are blues—but we are nevertheless united in our determination to see that justice is done today and in the future.

The right hon. Gentleman was eloquent in referring to the fact that there were deficiencies in the terms of reference set out in the 2009 report. I am delighted that he was gracious to have mentioned that, great achievement though it was, it is good to bring this back to the House today. Indeed, I am sure that there might have been nervousness when the motion was tabled. Officials and Cabinet Ministers, as perhaps happened back in 2009, may have fed one another's anxiety that releasing Cabinet minutes and documents before the end of the time limit under the 30-year rule might not allow free discussion in future.

Perhaps that nervousness was triggered by the advice given and discussions that took place on the Iraq war—indeed, there is perhaps anxiety about information yet to be fully disclosed—but I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. I was pleased to hear her words today that no stone will be left unturned and that full, unredacted papers will be provided to the panel. That is really important because, as has been eloquently described today, there is still a feeling of cover-up—the feeling that people are willing to make smears to cover up their own failings at the time. I am reassured by the determination of the House and the Government to ensure that the Hillsborough independent panel and the families have access to the information that they deserve.

I have a question that I appreciate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary cannot answer now. I encourage her to ensure that the panel has the full time to be able to do its work. The Bishop of Liverpool has recently recovered from illness, but he is also leading another panel that is due to report to Parliament within the next six months, so I should like to encourage my right hon. Friend to make certain that the secretariat is appropriately staffed to make sure that there is no delay in ensuring that the more than 2 million documents are gone through at a good pace, so that people hear the truth as quickly as possible.

I support what my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Stephen Mosley) said earlier about the BBC. It was kind of someone from the BBC to phone me to talk about why the BBC is continuing to press the Government on the appeal. I agree with my hon. Friend, and I say to them now that they should ensure that the process can go ahead unhindered, but it should wait its turn until the families have seen what information is held.

I have a final plea to football fans everywhere. It is not often that I support Sir Alex Ferguson, especially as people will realise the rivalry between Liverpool and Manchester United, but I really do support what he said the other day: the time has come to end the vile chants about Hillsborough and—dare I say it the other way?—about Munich. I call upon premier league clubs to ensure that they do everything that they can to show that those vile chants should be treated as though they were racist chants. The clubs should hunt down the people doing these vile things—they might not realise how much it turns the knife again and again in the families and fans of our club—and ensure that those people are kicked out of football for good.

Madam Deputy Speaker, 15 April 1989 will never be forgotten in Liverpool. It will never be forgotten in people's hearts. That will continue, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton said—so it should—but with the disclosure of information and the publication that will finally come, I hope that we can at least show people that the truth will be outed and that there is nothing to hide from the truth. We must ensure that those people who walked along the Leppings Lane will never be forgotten, and they never will be in the House.

7.34 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): First, I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) for being late to the debate. I am sorry that I did not hear his introductory speech. I was chairing a Select Committee meeting, which I could not get out of. I came in for the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg). I thank him for what he said about the people of Sheffield and how they responded to people who were leaving the ground on that day. We have to remember that it was an era before mobile phones. People were desperate to make contact with families and friends. Houses were opened up; people were welcomed in; phones were used and cups of tea were made. That was felt by the people, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton has expressed similar feelings to me in the past about that.

I was at the game on that day. I was leader of Sheffield city council. Normally, when I went to matches at Hillsborough, I was on the Kop. That day, I was in the directors' box, at the invitation of the club to go to a semi-final; I had been to a number over the years. I remember when things started to happen that, initially, there was a feeling that there might be a bit of disturbance in the crowd. We could see people start some movement. People were trying to clamber over the fences. Eventually, it became apparent that something more serious had happened—an accident of some kind. The thought was that people had been crushed and perhaps fainted. It took an awful, long time for even people sitting there watching the events to realise the horror of what had actually happened. Initially, we were told that 60-odd people had died. Then it became more, of course, as the events unfolded.

I remember simply going back to the directors' box, being kept abreast of events and just simply sitting with the directors and one or two friends who were there and crying. What else could we do? This was in our city, in my football ground: 96 people had died before our eyes. What else could we do? Next morning, I went back to the ground, after the Prime Minister had been there, with representatives of the three councils—Liverpool, Nottingham and Sheffield—and the clubs to look at the scene where things had happened, and people simply stood and cried again.

This was a tragedy, of course, above all else for the people who died, for their families, for the people who were injured, for Liverpool as a football club and for Liverpool as a city, but it was also a tragedy for Sheffield and Sheffield Wednesday as well. We went a few days later outside the ground to see the scarves, the flowers and the messages from football fans all over the country. This was a tragedy for football and football fans, and it could have happened to any club and many grounds up and down the country, but it happened there on that day. Therefore, although the tragedy is with Liverpool, there is also a desire in Sheffield to have all this information come out in the open. We want to see it out in the open. We want to see as much information as possible out there, so that people can really believe that the cover-ups are at an end and they can reach their own decisions about that information. There are real concerns about the coroner's inquiry and the artificial cut-off point. In my view, that should never have happened. I hope that this might let some light fall on that.

I was a member of the police authority as well. I will not go into all the details about the police's actions. That has been covered already. All that I have to say is that, the previous year, I went round when the same two clubs were to play a semi-final at Hillsborough with a senior police officer and looked at the arrangements. My understanding is that they were somewhat different on the day of the disaster than they had been in the previous year.

So, in the end, it is incumbent on us all to make sure that this information is available, particularly for the families and friends and those who were injured to get the certainty that they have lacked all this long time—certainty, when they have not known whether something is there, hidden away, that has not been brought out into the light of day that might better explain exactly what happened, why it happened and whether it could have been avoided and their loved ones could still be alive today if other action had been taken.

I am doing my small part. I have already been approached by the panel. I have papers in the Sheffield archives that I understand are classified as my personal papers, but they relate to my responsibilities as leader of the council. Some of them relate to Hillsborough, and I have indicated that I am quite prepared to have all that information in the public domain. It is incumbent on us all to do our small bit to make sure that the information gets out into the open.

7.40 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): May I say how humbling was the address by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)? I know that he is a football fan to his very core, and the emotion with which he spoke touched Members on both sides of the House. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on a job well done so far; he has represented his constituency fantastically well, and the people of Liverpool brilliantly, and he deserves great commendation for that.

Like many other Members, I would like to thank the 140,000 people who signed the petition. I very much like this new type of democracy that we are bringing to this place. Democracy evolves, and the fact that this debate is taking place is possibly the best testament to the new process. Obviously, I pay tribute to the families of the 96.

I also want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). The passion in his words spoke volumes, and all the work that he, with other colleagues, has put into instigating the Hillsborough independent panel is very much appreciated. I hope that he is satisfied with the words that he heard from the Home Secretary, and with the tone in which they were uttered.

Like everyone in this debate, I can remember exactly what I was doing on 15 April 1989. I was starting a business, and I was in the John Lewis store in Oxford Circus, trying to foist some of my new business's produce on to the customers going by. I knew that some fantastic games of football were about to start, and I kept trying to steal away from what I was hoping to be my new career to catch a few tiny moments of each game. The match should have been, as most other FA cup semi-finals are, a fantastic game of football, with controversy and memorable incidents on the football pitch, but they should have had to do with football, not what we now remember that date and game for. Twenty-two years later, people really should not still be unable to get the complete truth. How can one learn from the lessons of the past if one is not presented with all the information?

I read the Taylor report, and it is obvious from what many Members have said that there was a complete breakdown in communication in the police. Liverpool fans were magnificent in the way they helped each other on that day, after the tragedy. It is unbelievable that the emergency services were so slow in responding, and that ambulances were kept outside the stadium. Hooliganism played no part whatever; police failure was the cause. Police practice was to blame.

I do not want to reiterate everything that has been said; I want to give a slightly different perspective. The first is from someone I do not know: the Liverpool goal-keeper at the time, Bruce Grobbelaar. I remember reading an interview with him in which he said:

> "Two minutes into the game, I was aware of a surge behind me. I saw the movement out of the corner of my eye, and I heard a lot of shouting, a lot of noise.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

> The ball went into that section soon after, and as it was returned, there were voices coming from below me.
>
> As I looked down into the front of those pens, I could see people pressed up against the mesh. The wire was digging into their faces, and people were shouting: 'Bruce, can you help us, please? We can't breathe.'
>
> What was I to do? I'm about to take a goalkick in this massive game, but all I could think of was those contorted faces and people crying for help. After clearing the ball, I remember shouting to a steward to do something.
>
> The ball went out and I started bellowing at a policeman standing by a gate to open it. He said he couldn't and would have to liaise with his colleagues. There was a sense of panic.
>
> When the ball sailed into the crowd for a third time, I could see people being lifted out of those terraces. There were screams and cries all around which I'll never forget, and I shouted to the policeman: 'Please open that gate, before it's too late. Please.'
>
> When the ball went out again I made a bee-line for the ref. I pointed to the scenes behind my goal, and he only needed to look once.
>
> The gate had been opened, and people were beginning to pour onto the pitch. We were six minutes into the game, and he turned to all the players, and said: 'Right, we've got to get off.'"

Members of the House probably do not know that I have been a qualified, active football referee since the age of 12. I was signed up to do that by my dad's best friend, a football referee of the highest quality. His name was Ray Lewis, and he was the referee at Hillsborough on that day. He is very much on the record about what, in his view, happened behind the scenes. He said that when he attended the police briefing 90 minutes before the game, there was nothing to suggest that there would be problems at the game. There was no reason to believe that there was a problem leading up to the kick-off. When the game got under way, he could see the beginnings of problems at the Leppings Lane end, but there had been problems at that end in previous games—lessons that had not been learned.

When Mr Lewis was eventually told by South Yorkshire police at 3.6 pm to stop the game, the full gravity of the situation simply was not clear, as the hon. Member for Sheffield South East has said. Minute by minute, hour by hour, the horror of what had happened in front of Mr Lewis began to unfold. He was told of the first fatality at 3.40 pm. He said:

> "To a certain extent you are shocked and numbed."

He had gone to referee one of the biggest games of football in his life, and he came away having experienced one of the worst possible situations that can be put before anybody. The corridors and the referee's office were used for first aid, and the majority of people who came into that area were suffering from shock, rather than life-threatening injuries. People simply were not aware, until 3.40 pm, of the extent of the problem outside.

Like many in the House who were present, Mr Lewis called it the blackest day of his life. Twenty years on, like many in this place, he went to the memorial service at Anfield, Liverpool's home ground, and experienced the unbelievably magnificent show of support that probably only the city of Liverpool can generate for its football fans. He completely understands the continuing passion of the families of the 96, and what they have been fighting for.

Like many in this House, I love the city of Liverpool. It brings so much to our wonderful country. When one tries to put oneself in the position of the parents and relatives of the people who passed away on that day, it can only lead to demanding the full disclosure of every document, in the method described by Members on both sides of the House. Allow the families of the 96 finally to come to terms with these tragic events.

7.49 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): May I add my tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) and commend the families of the 96 for their dignified fight for justice and truth? The families that I have spoken to simply want to know the truth behind what happened that day. I want to tell the story of one family in their own words and raise some of the questions that need to be answered.

My constituent Barry Devonside was at the match. His son Chris was 18 and he died that day. I shall continue in Barry's own words:

> "Having left the ground at around 3.45 I made my way to the Halifax road and hopefully on to the point where we had arranged to meet following the game. I was halfway up the Halifax road when I met up with Chris's friend and two others who had travelled with us, asking where Chris was. Jason, Chris's friend, told me I should expect the worst. He said Chris had been killed. I turned around and made my way towards the ground. As I passed a telephone box, there were about 100 people wanting to use the phone. I suppose they were wanting to ring home to let their family know that they were safe or to give bad news.
>
> I spoke with a female constable and said to her that I had just been told that our son had been killed in the ground, and she said I should go to the gym which was being used as a temporary mortuary. I made my way there in total fear that what Jason had said to me was true. Arriving at the gym, I asked a lady where is the temporary mortuary. She pointed me in the direction, which was a few yards away. I knocked on the door and it seemed a lifetime for someone to answer.
>
> It was a policeman who answered. He must have been the biggest policeman that I have ever seen. I realised why he was there: the police must have been expecting trouble. I gave him my name and that of our son Christopher and our address. He said, 'Stand there.' He went in. He must have been away 10 or 12 minutes. On his return he told me that there was nobody of Christopher's description, which I could not understand as Jason had told me that he had gone into the temporary mortuary and given Chris's full details to the police, his name, address and the name of his father, and stated that I was at the game.
>
> I also gave the police officer a description of Chris. He was wearing a Welsh international rugby shirt but I was told no, he was not there. I wanted to call my wife but I could not remember our telephone number. A police sergeant offered to help. He spoke on my behalf but was told that we were ex-directory."

Mr Devonside said that his number had never been ex-directory, but he was refused the opportunity to be put through to his wife. He went on:

> "It was at this point that a lady a resident of Sheffield, Betty Thorp, kindly offered me help. She offered to drive me around a number of hospitals, looking in hope that Jason was wrong and Chris might be in one of the hospitals. I think we visited three hospitals, including a mortuary where we saw a number of police officers sitting on the floor looking shocked, and in the middle of the floor was a pile of clothes about 3 ft high.
>
> Having been looking for Chris for about 5 or more hours, I was told to go a police station where they may have some information. This I did and waited for my brother and brother-in-law to arrive. Following this, around 11pm, we were told to go to the temporary mortuary, where Chris was all the time. Having identified Chris, the police wanted certain information from me. Apart from the

relevant information, the only interest they had was about alcohol and had we consumed any. I can only think the police needed time to get their story right, though why they would need that time to keep a father away from his dead son I don't know.

On leaving the gym with Betty Thorp and leaving the ground to look for Chris, there were a large number of press. They were shouting over to me, 'Do you have any comment to make about Liverpool supporters urinating on the dead and stealing from the dead?'"

Those are Barry's own words.

Let us hope that tonight we are a step closer to the full disclosure of the documents that the families need. I have been asked to raise some questions. The families need to be satisfied that they have all the information, otherwise many will wonder whether they know the truth or not. Why did certain things happen? Who took the decisions? What was discussed by police officers? Why were changes made to the notes of junior officers? What discussions took place between politicians? What influence did the culture of the time have? Why were the ambulances not allowed on the pitch? Why were fans pushed back into the enclosure as they tried to escape?

Some of these questions were answered in Lord Justice Taylor's inquiry, but other answers are still needed, and the truth may be different from what was said at the time, and the truth may be different from what is in the Cabinet papers. Did police officers agree a line? Why did the press say that Liverpool fans stole from the dead and urinated on the bodies? Why did *The Sun* vilify the dead and show them and their families such disrespect?

Why was the most experienced senior police officer in South Yorkshire removed from his duties, yet not replaced with someone who understood how to balance safety with control? That person who knew in 1987 to delay the start of the same game was not there in 1989. I attended that game in 1987 and I remember how dangerous it could have been on that occasion. The same thing could have happened that year, but the police preparation was different.

The culture at football matches in the 1970s and 1980s was a disgrace. There was no balance between dealing with football-related violence and antisocial behaviour on the one hand, and public safety on the other. Anyone who watched football at that time experienced the ill-treatment of fans. The vast majority of us who watched football went to watch football, not to engage in violence, but the culture was such that safety was of no interest to those in charge of policing football, so people were pushed back into the central pen as they tried to escape, ambulances were prevented from coming on to the pitch, and the worst of the media lied about the dead and their grieving families.

The families of the 96 need the truth. They need to believe that they have all the facts. If the Government release their papers, they need to release all the papers once and for all. I heard the explanation from the Home Secretary about why the Government will withhold some personal details, but I caution her. The families and the wider community have faced countless obstacles, insults and setbacks—

Mrs May: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and enabling me to clarify the point. The Government will not withhold any details. Any decision about redaction—and it should be minimal redaction—will be taken by the panel. The hon. Gentleman referred to personal details. It will be for the panel to discuss with the families whether personal details should be redacted, and that decision will be taken jointly. The Government will not redact anything in the papers that they release.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for that clarification. She has made that point three times now, and it is extremely important that she is firm about it. It is the families' perception that matters. They need to have total confidence. That is the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth). The families need to have every confidence that the information released is all the information. That is what I am trying to achieve by pushing that point with the Home Secretary.

The families have faced countless obstacles, insults and setbacks as they have pursued their campaign for justice and for the truth, so we need to be very sure that all the information is released and nothing is hidden. Full disclosure must mean full disclosure.

7.58 pm

Mr Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I have been a Member of Parliament since 1979 and I do not think I have witnessed another debate of the quality of tonight's. That says something to the families that were partially destroyed by the events we are recalling, and to the wider community that has kept a constant interest in the issue.

This event has affected my constituency, the town of Birkenhead, more than any other single event that I can recall, so the thanks that Members have registered tonight to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) come not only from the families—obviously from the families—but from practically the whole of the Birkenhead constituency which, as I said, has been affected by these events and continues to be affected as by no other events that I can recall.

Back in 1963 I was sitting with my grandmother as she died. She was grieving the loss of two of her children 70 years previously. She was of course looking back to a time when it was more common for children to die, and yet she said that she could not bear people trying to cheer her up by saying that she would get over it. She did not want to get over it. It seemed that getting over it would be a denial of the existence and celebration of her children's lives. However, she did know what had happened to her children and so was able quickly to put closure on their deaths.

The families I represent in Birkenhead, and those represented by other Members who have spoken today, have been denied that closure by two indescribable acts of horror that have been inflicted upon them. The first act was the press campaign. To have to cope with members of one's family going off to a football match and coming back from the undertakers is an event that most of us—thank God—will never have to deal with. Trying to grapple with the immensity of what has happened to one's family while constantly having to read attacks in the press almost on them, and certainly on their mates and more widely on their mates in the football club, is an unspeakable horror.

Although the House has at long last come to a mind on what we and the Government should be doing, we do not have the power to compel one of the other big

[Mr Frank Field]

players in the event similarly to make a public apology for what has happened. I hope that one of the messages we send out tonight will be a clear one to News International that it too has a part to play if we are to draw a line in the sand for those families. That seems to me to be the first indescribable horror that was inflicted upon those families.

The second horror has been referred to by other Members. It is 22 years since the events, but only now are we in the position, I hope, to bring closure through complete revelation about what actually happened, if that is what the panel decides. I have attended only one other debate in which those on the Front Benches have stayed for the duration, and that was the Falklands debate. Those who are unfamiliar with our procedures might not understand the significance of that, but it is remarkable not only that the Home Secretary is here but that the Culture Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), to whom people have rightly given credit, and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), are also present. I thank my right hon. and hon. Friends for the role they have played in reaching the stage we are at tonight.

I thank the Home Secretary, as many have done, for the diligence she has shown and is showing tonight. My plea to her is that she will keep up that diligence to ensure that all the evidence is made available and that no piece of paper is withheld from the inquiry panel so that no one can whip up any debates in future and claim that we do not know what actually took place. That must include the papers and briefing that were given to Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister, before she made the trip to which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) referred.

None of us can undo those events. None of us can undo the injustice that the families in Birkenhead, in Merseyside and beyond have suffered, but News International can help to draw a line under these events and we, in support of the Home Secretary, can ensure that this is the last inquiry, the last panel and the last effort to put into the public domain all the information so that the families can, like my grandmother, know what happened and can, even if it is 22 years late, begin to grow the scar tissue that will allow them better to face the world, while obviously never forgetting what they have lost.

8.4 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): May I begin by paying tribute to the dignity of the families of the 96 and to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) for securing today's debate? May I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and many other colleagues for their tenacious pursuit of the release of these files over many years? I know that the people of Liverpool and also the people of south Yorkshire and Nottingham, where I grew up, are proud of the work they have done to secure today's debate. I think I speak on behalf of hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House when I say that, having heard their passionate and moving speeches, even more people across the country will be just as proud tonight.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the Government on the introduction of the e-petitions scheme over the summer. I believe that this debate is evidence that we should see petitions not as a gimmick, but as a tool for informing debate on what the public want us to think and talk about. I commend the Backbench Business Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), for its determination that the debate should take place.

I would like to say clearly from the outset that no one in this place should be in any doubt whatever that today's debate is about reconciling a major injustice. What happened at Hillsborough was a tragedy first and foremost for the families, but also for the great city of Liverpool, a city that has come together and shown a unique solidarity over the past two decades that we should all recognise. It was also a tragedy for our police, our politicians and our media, because the myths that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton has described were allowed to surface, fester and, for many, become ingrained as the truth. Today, in this House, we have a chance to put that right. In order for that to happen, we need to know beyond a shadow of a doubt what the Government documents say. Cabinet minutes to briefing papers, speeches and drafts—all need to be given to the independent panel and all must be uncensored and without redactions. Only then can the panel make a full assessment of what happened, who knew what and why they chose to do what they did. I very much welcome the statement that the Home Secretary made tonight.

Fifteen years in the British Army means that I am, sadly, no stranger to the loss of close friends and colleagues. If I learned anything from those difficult times, it is that part of the grieving process for the families involves getting to the truth and knowing all the facts that surround the deaths of loved ones. Although I support the release of any uncensored Government documentation from 1989 to the present day, I wish to make it clear that I believe that it is right, as the Home Secretary and other Members have said, to allow the families to see that information first. It should be the job of the independent panel, in conjunction with the families, to use its discretion over what files should be released into the public domain. I am of the opinion that the release of distressing images of those who tragically died and personal information, such as contact details and medical records, is clearly not in the public interest and would serve only to inflict greater distress on the families.

Sadly, for over two decades we have allowed the families' questions to go unanswered. For over two decades we have allowed them to suffer. I believe that that is unacceptable and falls short of the standards that we in Britain should expect from the police, our media and, yes, our politicians. I was delighted that nearly 100 MPs from nine political parties signed the petition requesting a debate on this issue. It showed the public that we understood the depth of feeling, and my hope is that it shows the families that we as a Parliament are finally serious about securing justice and clearing the names of those who tragically died.

Back in April 1989, I was a Nottingham Forest Junior Red, a devoted supporter of Brian Clough and a great admirer of Kenny Dalglish. I tried my best to get a ticket for the semi-final but I was not able to, so my family and I were spared the ordeal of being present on that fateful day, but the horrors that the fans who were there felt, and the anguish that their families have suffered since, have resonated with people throughout the country.

I believe now that the people have spoken: in just three short weeks over the summer, 140,000 mobilised and signed the petition. The depth of feeling is overwhelmingly clear, and now we have not only the chance but, more important, the responsibility to act. The time has come for the families to have their most agonising questions answered. The time has come for full disclosure. Put simply, the time has come for justice for the 96. I very much hope that the whole House will support this motion.

8.11 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I contribute to this debate today as a season ticket holder at Hillsborough stadium. Every time I attend a match, I walk in through the Leppings Lane entrance to the stadium, to the South stand, and, every time I walk under the shadow of what is now known as the West stand, the Leppings Lane stand, I remember and think about the 96 who died. It is impossible not to. Every time one visits that ground, one finds it impossible not to think of what happened there that fateful day.

I also live in Hillsborough so the stadium is very much a part of every day life, and anybody who knows the area knows that the stadium is at the heart of Hillsborough and impossible to avoid. Every time I drive past the stadium into town, I pass the memorial to the 96, and every time one passes the memorial, even to this day one finds it covered with red and white scarves and flowers, as a tribute to those who died. I, as a citizen of Hillsborough, am therefore constantly reminded of the pain and suffering that must be felt by the families and loved ones of those who died.

Sheffield Wednesday fans and the people of Hillsborough will never, ever escape the memory of what happened that day, or the events and their consequences. Nor would they want to, and I want to put on the record tonight the fact that the people of Sheffield and, in particular, Hillsborough stand in solidarity with the people of Liverpool over what happened that day.

My old constituency office was the next to the walled garden in Hillsborough park which stands as a further memorial to the 96. It is a lovely, tranquil place, and walking through the entrance one is told, "You'll Never Walk Alone". That, more than anything else, stands as a tribute to the dignity and enduring determination of the families of the 96 to secure justice and accountability for what happened that awful day.

Although I, like many right hon. and hon. Members, was not at the stadium that day, I can still vividly remember watching the television and witnessing the unfolding of a tragedy, the like of which had not been seen before at an English football stadium. At the time it seemed unbelievable that it could be happening at not only one of the most important matches of the season, an FA cup semi-final, but importantly at what was seen at the time as one of the best stadiums in the country.

The stadium was also at the time one of the largest in the country and could at that point hold about 55,000 fans. It had been used on numerous occasions by the FA to host major matches, including many previous semi-finals, and reference has already been made to the previous semi-final, involving Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, at Hillsborough, when Liverpool emerged 2-1 winners.

The ground had also been used during the World cup of 1966, when a number of group matches as well as a quarter-final were held there, and it was for that tournament that much of the ground was redeveloped, with the Leppings Lane end, where the Liverpool fans were located on that fateful day in 1989, gaining a new stand and terrace, with a capacity of about 14,000.

To the north end, the revolutionary 10,000-seat cantilever stand had been erected, and a further development in the mid-1980s was a roof on the massive Spion Kop, on the east side of the ground, which at the time could house up to 21,000 fans standing. The importance of that point is that Liverpool FC, given that it had a far greater proportion of fans wanting to attend the match that day, had objected quite vociferously to their not being allocated the Spion Kop at the match.

In nature, the stadium was typical of many major English football grounds at the time, and indeed its layout was similar to that of Aston Villa's Villa Park and Manchester United's Old Trafford. My point is that, given that the stadium was one of those with the highest standards in the country, it is absolutely unbelievable that Sheffield Wednesday did not have a safety certificate for it. That alone tells us a great deal about the standards in football at the time, and we should never forget that.

In this contribution, I do not want to go into the detail of the events that day, because my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) told us what happened that day in incredibly moving and, in fact, heartbreaking detail. We do not therefore need to go over that ground again, but, as many other hon. Members have said, after 22 years the families of the 96 who died that day need to know the full story.

Now it is right that all the papers relating to the events before, during and after the tragedy are released, and I welcome the Home Secretary's statement to that effect. Tonight, my hon. Friend—my friend both inside and outside the Chamber—the Member for Sheffield South East has set a very good example by stating that he will release any documents in which he was involved as leader of the city council at the time, and I hope that the other individuals and agencies involved will do the same.

Within days of the disaster, Lord Justice Taylor was appointed to conduct an inquiry, which sat for 31 days and published two reports: an interim report, which laid out the events of the day and offered immediate conclusions; and a final report, which made general recommendations on football-ground safety.

Taylor's immediate conclusions laid the blame on two main things, and I make no apology for going over this again because we need to nail once and for all the lies that have been told about what happened that day. The report noted that, although Hillsborough was considered one of the best grounds in the country, the small number of turnstiles at the Leppings Lane end—anybody who knows the area will know that access to the ground is fairly restricted—and the poor quality of the crush barriers on the terraces were a contributing factor to the tragedy, but Taylor also stated clearly that the official cause of the disaster was a failure of police control.

[Angela Smith]

Owing to the small number of turnstiles, it has been estimated that it would have taken until 3.40 pm to get all ticket holders—that is the key point: all ticket holders—on to the Leppings Lane terrace, so a decision was taken to open an exit gate. It is important to recall, too, the report's conclusion that the total number of fans entering the terrace was no more than the total capacity of the standing area, but because fans entering the terraces headed for the central pens, 3 and 4, as directed by the large notice pointing them that way above the tunnel underneath the Leppings Lane stand, those pens became seriously overcrowded.

Normally, a police officer or steward would have directed fans away from stands 3 and 4 because they were full, but on that day this did not happen; there were no stewards in the area. The official capacity of pens 3 and 4 was about 2,000, but the report estimated that over 3,000 people were in these pens shortly after kick-off at 3 pm. It was this overcrowding that caused the fatal crush.

However, it was the process of the inquests into the deaths of those who died that has proved most controversial to the families of the bereaved. For some reason that we have yet to discover, the coroner, Dr Stefan Popper, decided to limit the main inquest to events up until 3.15 pm on the day of the disaster, his rationale being that all the victims were dead by that time. This decision has, quite rightly, angered the families of the victims, many of whom felt that this meant the inquest was not able to consider the response of the police and the other emergency services after that time. The inquest returned the well-known verdicts of accidental death on the victims.

The lack of rigour at the original inquest, coupled with the appalling attack on Liverpool fans by *The Sun*, means that the appalling loss suffered that day has been made immeasurably more difficult to deal with for the families of those who died. It is little to be wondered at that so many members of the families affected are here today, for they feel that justice has not been done, in the sense that those responsible for what happened that day have still not been held to account. That is why we must have full and unredacted disclosure of all the documents held by the Government relating to the tragedy. We must know what briefings were prepared and delivered to Margaret Thatcher and her Government at that time, and we must know precisely who briefed *The Sun* with information that was not only grossly inaccurate and untrue but deeply damaging and offensive to the families of the 96 who died.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful case. I rise to ask this question precisely because she is not a Liverpool MP. Throughout the 1980s, the city of Liverpool and the people of Liverpool were demonised and mischaracterised with an almost McCarthyist fervour, not only by News International but by the media across the board. Does she think, as I do, that that deliberate, ugly, grotesque mischaracterisation led to the attitudes that informed not only the media coverage but a lot of the other actions surrounding these events?

Angela Smith: I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton said, the Liverpool fans were no better and no worse than any other fans up and down the English football league. There was no reason to single out Liverpool fans as being particularly prone to hooliganism or violence of any kind; they are the same as any other fans in the country.

I finish by referring to the one positive legacy of the Hillsborough tragedy: the implementation of the Taylor recommendations relating to all-seated stadiums at the top levels of English football. This development has benefited the game enormously, making it much more attractive for spectators, as far as women and children are concerned. It has made the experience of watching football much safer all round. There are some out there who would bring back so-called limited standing. To that suggestion, we need to deliver a resounding no. We must never forget the 96 who died, and we must deliver accountability for the actions of those who were primarily responsible for the disaster, but we must also respect the memory of what happened, and one of the best ways of doing that is to ensure that it never happens again.

8.23 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): We have already heard, in the eloquent speeches made by many hon. Friends, moving tributes to the families of the 96 victims. I want to recognise the tireless work that so many have done to get us to where we are today. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for the work that he did as Culture Secretary to secure the release of documents and to establish the independent panel; to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for her role in calling for the release of the documents; and to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who, since being elected to this House, as he did before, has relentlessly pressed and campaigned for the publication of all documents. To the 140,000 people who signed the petition, I say thank you for ensuring that we are having this debate today—but it should not have taken so long.

None of us needs reminding of the events of that dark, dark day 22 years ago. Those dreadful scenes from Hillsborough will never be forgotten in Liverpool; they cast a permanent scar across the city and on Merseyside. What happened on that fateful afternoon was a tragedy not just for the people of Liverpool but for our whole country.

Growing up in Wembley, north-west London, I commemorated the disaster every year. Two of the 96 people who lost their lives were Sarah and Victoria Hicks, sisters aged just 15 and 19, Sarah studying chemistry at Liverpool university, Victoria still at school—the same school I went to. I and many others spent hours on a bench dedicated to their memory in the rose garden at our school. I met Jenny Hicks, Sarah and Victoria's mother, at the 21st anniversary memorial service at Anfield. She is so brave. Jenny Hicks, her family, and all the families are so brave, and they have suffered enough. Their dignified and unwavering campaign for justice is an inspiration to us all.

I want to read a few words from a moving letter sent to me by one of my constituents:

> "Everyone in the House of Commons has known private grief and experienced the same patterns of raw emotion. It is incumbent on all of you to recover from your memories those feelings which possessed you at the time of your grief and loss, and project

yourselves into the unimaginable torment of living, in that condition, not for twenty-two days, or twenty-two weeks, or twenty-two months, but for twenty-two-years; in an unrelieved cloud of unknowing, tormented by the sure and certain knowledge that the facts, which alone, can end their private agony, have been sealed up against them, locked away by an indifferent and heedless power, that refuses to discuss the motives and purposes which drives its actions.

For twenty-two years, the immediate and extended families of the ninety-six victims of the Hillsborough disaster have endured the unendurable. With no comfort but their inmost resources and the solidarity of their friends, who, as the petition has shown, are no longer counted in handfuls but in Legions."

For too long, these families have suffered without the truth. The actions taken by a few during and after that day have made their burdens even more difficult to bear. From the attempts at a cover-up to the desire to depict fans as the authors of their own disaster, so many scandals have been perpetrated against them. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh wrote, an orchestrated campaign was conducted to place the blame for what happened on the victims rather than the authorities. Senior police officers lied about why the gates at the Leppings Lane terrace were opened, blaming Liverpool fans for forcing through them when in fact it was the authorities who had opened them. Ambulances which could have saved lives were refused entry into the ground. Police officers were ordered to change their accounts of what had occurred to cover up mistakes. A national newspaper printed lies about fans who were trying to save lives, disgracefully accusing them of stealing from victims and attacking police. Despite the Taylor inquiry finding that the police were at fault, not a single officer responsible for the conduct of the police that day has been disciplined. It simply is not right.

Twenty-two years later, it is hard to believe that so many questions remain unanswered. That is why it is imperative that all documentation is released, first to the independent panel and the families, and then what is appropriate to the public. I am grateful that the Home Secretary has clarified that the Government will not hold back any documents, because the independent panel and the families need everything—including all the Cabinet minutes, documents and papers relating to the Hillsborough disaster, right through to the present day. There is much speculation about what may have been said, done or written, including in correspondence between Douglas Hurd and Margaret Thatcher. The families will continue to be haunted by the speculation until everything is released. I echo the request of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh that the release of all information from private companies, specifically from News International, be included.

Today, all of us in this place owe it to every family who are suffering to put right what was done wrong and to ensure that the unredacted truth is unequivocally released, so that we can finally see what has taken far too long: justice for the 96.

8.29 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who has made one of a number of extremely powerful speeches in tonight's debate. May I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the House that I had to leave the Chamber for about half an hour earlier in the debate, as a result of which I missed the closing parts of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), including the citation of the names of the 96, and the opening of the Home Secretary's speech?

I join this debate with humility, because so many colleagues from both sides who have spoken were present at Hillsborough in 1989, lost friends who died and were among the 96, or have been involved in campaigning on this injustice for all or most of the past 22 years. My qualification is none of those things, but I speak on behalf of constituents in my Liverpool, West Derby constituency, some of whom are here in the Gallery. I welcome them to the House and pay tribute to all the campaigners and family members in the Gallery who have waited a very long time for this debate.

May I join those who have remarked upon how this debate came about? More than 100,000 ordinary people up and down the country asserted people power. I agree with the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) that this is a good way for this House to practise democracy. It gives citizens a greater opportunity to have a direct input into the issues. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) said, it is an indictment of all of us from all parts of the House that it has taken such a long time for this important debate to happen, but happening it is.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh, as everyone else has done, for the crucial role he played in the Cabinet and now in opposition. In his powerful speech, he made a profound point about the different way in which victims are seen today, compared with 22 years ago, when victims were scapegoated by large sections of the media and in public discourse. As others have said more eloquently and powerfully than I can, people who were living with bereavement and had lost loved ones in recent hours and days had not only to grieve, but to face ludicrous and vile suggestions that their loved ones were somehow responsible for what had happened.

I know that those who are here today from Merseyside will really appreciate the speeches that were made by my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and the profound sense of solidarity that they expressed on behalf of the people of Sheffield. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East in particular made an incredibly powerful speech reflecting on his presence on the day and the role that he had at the time. He gave an important commitment at the end about his own papers from his time as leader of Sheffield city council. On behalf of my constituents and, I am sure, of other people who signed the petition that secured this debate, we are very grateful that he has given that important commitment.

This has been a highly dignified, persistent and long 22-year campaign for truth and justice. Like everyone else in this debate, I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton, who has been dogged in his persistence, ever since he was elected to this place less than 18 months ago, in seeking this important debate and in giving voice to the feelings of the people of Liverpool in general and of his constituency in particular. He took us to the Backbench Business Committee and mobilised 100 MPs from nine different parties, and it is down to him that we have secured the debate. I pay tribute to him for achieving that.

[Stephen Twigg]

I also join in the tributes to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) who, alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh, secured in government the setting up of the independent panel.

I do not wish simply to repeat what others have said, but I want to reaffirm some key points that have been made. As others have said, we know that the Taylor report made it clear that the major cause of what happened on that day was a failure on the part of the police, and that hooliganism played no part. I echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr Field) said in issuing a challenge to News International, *The Sun* and Kelvin MacKenzie, which I hope will come from all parties. We want to see a real, credible apology for what they and other newspapers said and did at the time. Having to endure truly appalling and vile coverage in *The Sun* and some other newspapers made the tragedy so much worse for the bereaved and the people who were suffering.

As has been said, in 2009 the Labour Government established the independent panel. I join others in thanking the Bishop of Liverpool, the Right Rev. James Jones. I know that Bishop Jones and other members of the panel have served diligently in pursuing justice for the 96 and their families.

Right hon. and hon. Members have referred to the many questions that remain unanswered. The 3.15 pm cut-off, ambulances not being allowed in, the decision to change the match commander, the farce of the inquests, police accounts being changed after the event—those are just some of the unanswered questions, to which the families rightly expect to have answers.

As everyone else has said, we warmly welcome what the Home Secretary has said today, particularly her reassurances about redactions. It is only right that full disclosure is made. She gave us the assurance that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh sought that such decisions are not for the Government but for the panel and the families. I know that the families and campaigners will also be very pleased that that assurance has been given. As others have said, it is vital that we have that full disclosure, and that we are sensitive to the needs and wishes of the families. As well as the panel having all the documents, it is therefore vital that the families see them before they become available to the wider general public.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): A number of Members who have spoken tonight have insisted that documentation from the time of the Hillsborough incident should be released. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is also documentation from before then that should be available? I was personally involved in an incident in exactly the place where the Liverpool supporters were on that day, at a game between Newcastle United and Sheffield Wednesday. I was traumatised by the event. A lot of Newcastle supporters were evicted. They were supposed to have been protesting, but they were fighting for their lives. I lost my shoes and got pushed to the back of the stand—I was lifted off my feet.

It is very important that the police learn from their mistakes, and that they come forward with information that they had previous to the Hillsborough disaster, because it could have been prevented.

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I am very happy to concur with what he says. He has made his case very powerfully, and there may be an opportunity for others to respond to his points later in the debate.

I hope that tonight's debate will mark an important milestone in the 22-year struggle for truth and justice. Many people have contributed to that progress, but like Members on both sides of the House, I want to finish by paying tribute to the families and those who have campaigned. It has taken a long time to get to this stage, but their diligence and persistence is now paying off. From the debate, let us see the progress that enables that campaigning to bear fruit, so that people get the answers to the questions for which they have been waiting for a very long time.

8.40 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I thank and congratulate my fellow former lord mayor of Liverpool, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), on such a powerful and emotional speech. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and the 139,000 who signed the petition, who all helped to secure this debate.

The Hillsborough Family Support Group—the families of the 96—along with Liverpool fans and players, and everyone associated with the football club, deserve recognition for never giving up in their search for the truth of what happened on 15 April 1989. They have shown such solidarity and dignity in their fight for only one thing: the truth.

As a Liverpudlian who proudly represented my city for 27 years, I now have the great privilege to represent West Lancashire. The Hillsborough disaster is just one of many bonds between my home town and my constituency. Too many people and their families and friends—entire communities—have had to live every single day with the terrible pain of the devastating events of that day. We remember the 96 who lost their lives at Hillsborough and we remember their families, but we also remember those who later took their lives because of what happened, and we remember the survivors, who are grateful to be back with their families, but who live with the emotional and physical scars. Their stories—truly heart-rending accounts—of the day's events are told with such lucidity, emotion and vivid imagery. It is as if it were yesterday rather than 22 years ago. That is probably the most important reason why I support the motion.

Many in the House and in the wider public debate will talk of the failure to heed warnings, of the ground's inadequacies in previous years, of the disgusting and disrespectful media coverage, and of the failure of the police operation on match day. Not just people in Liverpool will closely watch this debate and the Government's subsequent action, and nor is it just a national issue. As Damian Kavanagh reminds us,

> "there are many people in far-off places around the world who know the name of Liverpool because of our team."

The sense of injustice is felt around the world.

I very much welcome the commitment the Prime Minister made in his letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh, and the commitment given by the

Home Secretary today, that the families will see the unredacted papers. That is an appropriate and welcome response. I reiterate the call of my right hon. and hon. Friends for full public disclosure, and I look forward to the House supporting the motion later tonight. A wider community was deeply affected by the Hillsborough disaster. Only through full public disclosure of Government-related papers can we begin to address their sense of injustice.

Many people have contacted me about Hillsborough, and I wanted to give the House just a few examples of the stories that have been told to me. Kevin Wilkie, a constituent, was at the time a 15-year-old boy. He went off to the game with his father and his best friend, like so many others that day. Echoing the story from Bruce Grobbelaar, Kevin recalls that

> "a man…was squashed against the crash barrier behind me. He was grabbing me, begging me to help him. I still see his face. The colour in it changes. There was nothing I could do for him."

Kevin also lost sight of his best friend in the melee. He had become unconscious in the crush but, fortunately, he had been passed over the crowd and out over the fence to safety. He was one of the lucky ones.

Damian Kavanagh, who has written his story for the Hillsborough justice campaign, tells of how he was able to escape from the Leppings Lane end. He tells of how he had cuts on his hands from ripping down the advertising hoardings to create makeshift stretchers. His only other physical injury was a bruise on his back in the shape of a hand—the result of the pressure building up in the Liverpool end of the ground.

Families had a sense of guilt that their loved ones had returned from the game while their neighbours grieved for a husband, father, brother, sister or daughter. In an e-mail sent to me, one constituent said:

> "I didn't lose any relatives or friends on that day but I did lose 96 close friends that I didn't realise I had."

What happened in Sheffield on that day in April had implications that went well beyond Yorkshire. To quote a fan who was present:

> "Everybody was affected, everybody knew somebody who had been to the match. This disaster struck at the very heart of our community."

Let us remember that those people did not go off to war. They did not go out with the intention of rioting or fighting, and what happened was not an unforeseen natural disaster. They went as fathers, sons, brothers, sisters and mates to watch a football match—an afternoon of escapism and entertainment at the end of a working week. They were met by an absolutely disastrous failure on the part of officials and the police, followed by malicious stories and lies promulgated by the press. No one has yet been held to account, and no charges have been brought.

I cannot begin to imagine what anyone affected by Hillsborough has felt or experienced in the years since 1989. Loss and grief suffered privately are tough enough, but in this case, the events and the lies have been played out publicly. Their sense of grief and loss has been compounded by a deep and strong feeling of injustice. By any measure of fairness, humanity, justice and truth, the full disclosure of these documents would be demanded. We can never do anything to take away the pain of the families' loss, but, with the publication of all the documents, the Government can begin to heal the pain of injustice. It is long overdue, but it is time for the truth.

8.48 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Let me begin my contribution today by thanking all those Members of Parliament who supported the call for this debate. The Hillsborough disaster occurred when I was eight, but few other events have had such an impact on my life, or that of my community. It is a true honour to represent my home town, and I am thinking today especially of all those who have been affected. I pay tribute to those who have travelled here today to listen to us. My only hope is that we can do justice to their commitment, and live up to their example.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on leading the debate today. On the 20th anniversary of Hillsborough, I sat with my family in the Lower Centenary stand at a packed Anfield, and I listened to him lead our mourning as the lord mayor of Liverpool. I was taken aback then at his bravery in describing the impact of Hillsborough on his life, and I was deeply proud of him, although I did not know him. Little did I know that, just over a year later, we would both join this place and become friends—and I am really glad we have.

I also place on record the thanks that many of my constituents have asked me to bring to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). Their leadership in government led the way to the Hillsborough independent panel being brought into existence, and their support has meant a great deal. I thank the Home Secretary for her words today, which have demonstrated her encouragement of today's motion and full transparency, which is what we want. I thank Members, particularly those from Sheffield, for their contributions today and for their solidarity.

The motion we are debating today is essentially about the truth. That is what we want. For all those affected by events on 15 April 1989, we want to get to the truth—the truth uncensored, the truth without redaction, the truth with no questions left to answer. I want to say on behalf of my constituents why the truth matters so very much. To answer that question, I need to go back to the day itself.

As I said earlier, I was an eight-year-old girl at the time. It was about then that I started to go to football matches and, like many young children, I learned about the wonder of football—the atmosphere, the beauty, the skill on display—and I learned to stay close to my family and not get lost. On the occasion of the FA cup semi-final at Sheffield Wednesday that April, I was at home. Luckily, I was sat in our front room in our house in Bromborough with my dad—and I can still see the look on his face now, because he knew what was happening. Football fans all over Britain knew. They were watching on TV, listening on radios from other football grounds. Thousands and thousands were gripped with horror as bodies were pulled out of the pens in the Leppings Lane end of the Hillsborough ground, and thousands prayed for the safety of those being carried across the pitch on cheap advertising hoardings for stretchers.

The awfulness of that day sunk in over the weeks and months afterwards. It was the worst possible shock. As Alan Hansen, on the pitch playing for Liverpool that day, has said of the disaster,

> "the number of broken hearts is incalculable".

[Alison McGovern]

Sadly, for many I have spoken to over the years, there has been a grim recognition of how this could have happened. In the 1980s, football fans were broadly deemed by some to be scum. The relationship between supporters and the police was frequently poisonous. There was a culture of disrespect for fans.

As the interim Taylor report itself pointed out:

> "Over the last few years, hooliganism at and associated with football matches has strongly influenced the strategy of the police. In their plans and management they have concentrated on averting or containing threats to public order...it has led to an imbalance between the need to quell a minority of troublemakers and the need to secure the safety and comfort of the majority."

Yet this was something new in the scale of the horror. In the weeks that followed, people poured into Anfield to show their respects, and everyone wanted answers. Everyone wanted to know how on earth this could have happened.

Well, from a practical perspective, we do know why 96 people died and hundreds and hundreds suffered. We know it because Members have said it, but I want to say it again for clarity. The interim report of the Taylor inquiry, immediately after the disaster, found that police error allowed too many fans into too small an area of the ground, and an absence of effective leadership exacerbated the suffering caused. Despite problems of ground safety, different decisions could have been taken on that day.

As my neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr Field) commented, because of two terrible processes that happened straight away, both in the immediate aftermath and in the years that followed, we are still frozen in those early stages of grief in the awful horror of it all, unable to come to terms with it. That is why we need the truth now. The first awful process was the appearance of stories in newspapers which took the good names of fans who were at Hillsborough on that day and threw them in the mud. One newspaper in particular made untrue allegations of specific behaviour by fans that had simply never happened. Those newspapers took people who were suffering in a manner that few of us here can imagine, let alone have experienced, and ripped apart their dignity. Not only did those affected have to suffer physical and mental injury; they had to witness their honour being attacked as though they were the lowest of the low.

People may recall the pictures of newspapers being burnt in Liverpool at the time, but what they may not know is how those lies have echoed down through the years, and how they continue to be spread. I moved to London in 1999, fully 10 years after the disaster, and I was shocked then by how many people still believed the lies told about Hillsborough. They did not believe those lies out of malice, but because no one had ever corrected them before. On many occasions I have had to explain what actually happened at Hillsborough, why the calls for justice still ring out, and why people will not "just let go". Even today, we still see horrible claims repeated online, on websites. Those awful lies, which have been corrected any number of times, are still perpetuated. Often the people whom we correct are quite shocked, having simply assumed that football supporters were to blame.

I join those who support Sir Alex Ferguson's call for the Hillsborough chants to end, which was highlighted by the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). It is hugely important, and has emphasised the fact that the lies told about Hillsborough still have traction. However, given that not one person has ever paid a significant price for their dereliction of duty on that day—only the fans and the victims have paid that price —why would people think that anyone else was to blame?

That brings me to the second awful process that has brought us here today. Our justice system did not deliver, and has not been seen to provide a just account, for the families of those who died at or because of the disaster. No prosecutions have been brought against those who were responsible, despite the conclusions of the Taylor inquiry. The inquest process was flawed by the provision of insubstantial representation for families, and by a large number of other factors that undermine the authority of the verdict. Most seriously, as others have said, no evidence was considered about events after 3.15 pm on the day, so the actions of the police in the rescue operation, and numerous other crucial details that should have featured in a proper account, were not examined. The scrutiny of the evidence which took place in 1998 was likewise flawed, and private prosecutions did not provide conclusive verdicts.

The truth about Hillsborough has never been fully acknowledged. The truth about the causes of those deaths has not been put fully on the record in the way for which our legal system should allow. That is why, for 22 years, we have stood at Anfield and shouted for justice. It is why this campaign is supported by football fans from all teams, from all parts of Britain—as has been clear from what Members have said today—and indeed across the world. It is why I am trying to explain today why the full truth is so important to so many.

One of the most moving sights at the memorial service is the people who come wearing the colours of teams from far and wide to show their support. In every year that has gone by, our voices calling for justice have become louder. Each year, the numbers attending Anfield on the anniversary are larger. If there is anyone left in the country who thinks that the campaign for justice will just fade away over time, let me tell them that they are very wrong.

In my constituency, Unilever installed a permanent memorial to all victims of the disaster. It sits in a beautiful and peaceful part of Port Sunlight Village, providing another space for reflection and a marker of the indelible effects of 15 April 1989 on our community. The strength of our community, and our commitment to justice, will not fade.

The motion calls for full access to Government papers, unredacted and uncensored. Release of the Cabinet papers—which, thankfully, we have heard the Government support today—is an important step on the road towards a full account, bearing witness to a heartbreaking disaster. No evidence should be kept hidden, even that from the highest levels of Government. What we have asked for today—and, thankfully, succeeded in gaining—is the support of parliamentarians for a full and unrestricted account. Parliament should back this motion because general Government policy has already been changed in that Cabinet papers are kept private for 20, rather than 30, years. We have already waited 22 years for the truth about Hillsborough, and we cannot wait any longer. This is a straightforward matter of letting those affected know precisely what happened—of telling in respect of every locus where decisions were taken, what happened and why. Only then, when we know the truth, can we have justice, and can we hold up an account and say, "This is the truth. This is how our loved ones died. May such a thing never happen again. Their memory will never leave our hearts."

9 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Members often have the privilege of visiting schools, and we are always asked why we wanted to become an MP. I wanted to become one because of nights like tonight, when we have the chance to bring justice and right a real wrong. Another question we are asked is why MPs are called "honourable". After tonight, I shall always refer people to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram)—who has been in the Chamber for the past five hours but has just now disappeared. He gave a tremendous speech on a very important subject. One of the points he made was that this could have happened at any football ground in the country. He is right, and I want to refer to some of the things I have seen—my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) mentioned many such things in his speech earlier.

On Boxing day, it will be 49 years since I first walked into a football ground. Boxing day 1962 was when I saw my first game, and, sadly, it was the last game that Brian Clough played. About 30 minutes into the game, he was injured very badly. Even though that happened 49 years ago, the memory is still burned into my mind, because football has that effect on us; it hooks us in a way no other game in the world does. It becomes an obsession.

For football supporters, things were very different back in those days. We stood in a huge concrete stand that took 21,000 people. It was uncovered, and the day was freezing cold. The pitch had been covered in straw, and the straw had been pulled back. That was probably one reason why Clough's injury was so severe. There were at least 50,000 people in the ground for what was a second division match. They were united in wanting to see their team do well. Sadly, as has happened far too often, we got beaten 1-0. I have been a Sunderland fan for many years, and that is a common theme.

Such results do not dampen the passion people feel, however. Regardless of whether they support Liverpool, Everton or any other team in the league, it is their team and their town, and they want to support and get behind them. That passion was there no matter how badly we were tret—and some of the grounds were unsanitary or unsafe, and no other sport would have taken place in them.

If that was the situation back in the early '60s, how did 96 people get killed so much later on, in one of the grounds that was improved for the 1966 World cup? There is absolutely no doubt that the hooliganism of the '70s and '80s influenced the mindset of the people in authority in this country. Their attitude towards the fans was much harder back then. The police in particular believed that their job was to control crowds by getting the retaliation in first. In saying that, I do not in any way excuse the crass and disgraceful behaviour of some people—they besmirched the names of good football clubs—but football was not immune to what was happening outside in those days.

The police were strongly politicised in the 1980s. We had seen riots on the streets of Brixton, Toxteth and Tottenham. We had also seen the dispute at Wapping and the miners' strike, when ordinary working men, many of them football fans, were declared to be "the enemy within"—a phrase that was mentioned earlier in our debate in relation to the people of Liverpool. Crucially, just four years earlier, we had seen the disaster at the Heysel stadium, as a result of which we ended up with fans literally penned in cages. Was that seen as an overreaction at the time? It was not. People said, "Its all they deserve. If they are going to behave like animals, let's treat them like animals."

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I do not want to move away from the issue of the day, but I wish to make a point about what led to that penning in. What was done by people such as Ken Bates, who put up electrified fences at Stamford Bridge, led to disasters such as this and it is why every football fan in this country sympathises with this issue today.

Mr Anderson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, because he raises exactly the point I am trying to make. Sadly, it was the Liverpool fans who suffered that day but it could have been any of us, because the authorities took an attitude that said, "These people are out of control. We will treat them like animals." How did they do that? It was okay to herd people into a clearly overcrowded area. It was okay to keep forcing more and more people into confined spaces, despite their objections. My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck mentioned what happened to him and I experienced a similar event at the Leppings Lane end in Sheffield in 1968. We could not even get near the turnstiles, but the design of the ground funnelled people into an area. So we were pushed up against police horses and they could not move, let alone the crowd. What stays in my mind from that day was a policeman on horseback flailing with his baton, but he could not move—none of us could move. That took place 21 years before Hillsborough, so a catalogue of events led up to what happened on that day in 1989.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Sadly, I was at the Heysel stadium. Very few people misbehaved and the resulting problem occurred mainly because most of the Liverpool fans had been crushed together; there were far too many in a small pen. It is a tragedy that the lessons were not learned.

Mr Anderson: Again, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This was about how we treated football fans, which was different from how any other sports fans were treated in this country or across Europe. That was shown by the fact that when people were trying to escape from these cages, they were penned in—they were actually forced back. They were knocked back by the police, because the police thought that they were trying to invade the pitch for some reason other than to try to save their lives. That would not have happened in any other scenario.

As we have heard so often today, although all of that was a real scandal, just as bad, after the devastation to so many lives, is the way in which this issue has been covered up for two decades and more. It was covered up by the authorities and it was disgracefully covered up by some of the media in this country. The behaviour of *The Sun* has been highlighted today. As a former coal miner, I am not surprised that *The Sun* turns against

[Mr Anderson]

working people—it has done that for decades and I do not see how it will ever stop doing it. But that does not stop us, and others in this House and this country, from saying that that was out of order, particularly as there was an attempt to sway the conscience and belief of people in this country against ordinary people who were just having a day out supporting their football team.

As far back as 1999, I was working in Liverpool with some social workers, and in the days leading up to the 10th anniversary they were saying to me, "We've got to get justice for these people." I was working with the trade union movement and we tried to move that forward. We had discussions with the then Government but, sadly, despite all our best efforts, nothing happened. We have heard about how the courageous attempts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) started to bring some pressure to bear and we did then see movement from the Government some 10 years later.

We are still discussing this issue here today, 22 years down the line, and we hope that we are going to see justice done. We need everything out in the open and we need it now. We do not need some more vague promises of, "Somewhere down the line." We need to act when the information comes out. It is no good just saying, "This was wrong. That was wrong." We need to bring people to justice in this country. If it was wrong for them to have done this in 1989, it is right for them to face punishment in 2011, or whenever we can bring them to book. We need to make sure that we do so because we owe it to the 96. We owe it to the families who lost loved ones and we owe it to all the folks who will go to football games this weekend, because it is about them as well as about the people who went before them.

As has been rightly said, this is about every football fan in this country, because the truth is that football is still the beautiful game. It is a hugely emotive event, a game that does away with any sense of rationality. A person can believe that their team is the best team in the world when, quite frankly, it is not and probably never will be—[HON. MEMBERS: "Speak for yourself."] Look, I have to get votes in Newcastle. Football is a game that sometimes brings out the best and the worst in all of us who are obsessed by it. The feeling is never less than great and I hope that it never loses that feeling, that passion and that bond between people from all walks of life.

Football brings people together and one of the great experiences of my life is when Liverpool fans come to Sunderland and then come to the village in which I have spent most of my adult life to go to the memorial for Bob Paisley, the most successful Liverpool manager of all time, who was born and bred in the village that I am proud to come from. Bob Paisley's brother worked with my dad. There is a bond between people who can say that for the next 90 minutes they will shout at each other, saying that they hate one another—that they hate the very life of one another—but can come out and be the best of friends. There is nothing wrong with that and we should be proud of the culture that this country brought to the sporting world 150 years ago. That is something about which we should all be passionate and proud.

That is the real joy of football. It is miles away from the world of Sky, from the superstars who cannot even be bothered to come on to the pitch when some of us would give our left arm to play once for our team and from the agents who will destroy football if they can get away with it. We owe it to the 96 to ensure that justice is done today. We need to see justice. Failure to do so diminishes our game and our nation and it will diminish this House. We need to get on with it.

9.11 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is great to follow such an impassioned account of football fans' experience and the beautiful game from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson). May I also say what an honour it is to sit next to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), who made a truly extraordinary speech? I know that we are resolutely not to pay any attention or refer to anything that happens in the Gallery, Mr Speaker—I do not know whether you will strike me down or whether this will merely be struck from the record—but seeing the families and friends of the 96 break into spontaneous applause was quite something. She is a true red and a credit to Merseyside and her team.

It is an honour to be in the House for this debate. It feels like the House of Commons truly has risen to the occasion, bearing in mind the gravity of the responsibility placed on us by the amazing, tenacious and indefatigable campaign from so many seeking justice for the 96 and the truth about what happened on that awful day. I did not intend to speak in this debate, but my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South suggested that I did. Like many football fans who are Members of Parliament, I look at the tragedy and the way in which the people of Liverpool and the families affected have struggled with this day after day for 22 years and think that it is not my place to speak. My hon. Friend said, and I hope she is right, that football fans across the country should say how solidly we stand behind the people of Liverpool and Liverpool fans in demanding justice and full disclosure after so long.

This is not just about football fans. What happened is an injustice and anybody who wants to see serious injustices exposed, whether they are football fans or not, is behind the call for full disclosure. I know how welcome that is. As has been made clear in the many extraordinary contributions today, the fact that the Home Secretary has come to the House to confirm that she will make the Government documents available to the panel in their entirety and unredacted is very welcome.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): My hon. Friend has rightly said that this campaign touches everyone who seeks justice. A group of my constituents have a particular sense of empathy and solidarity with the families of the 96—the Bloody Sunday families, who have developed a very strong bond with those families. In a different way, they can empathise with exactly what families suffer whenever they have to struggle against indifference, injustice and insult and whenever survivors have to endure calumny and are asked by the powers that be, in the media and elsewhere, to carry some of the blame of that day. This issue touches many people, and the families of the 96 have all our hearts.

John Woodcock: My hon. Friend speaks eloquently and his words will resonate with the families and the many thousands who are watching the debate. The kind of resolution that came after so long in the Bloody Sunday inquiry is what everyone here in the House and the many people watching want to see. They want similar closure through access to the full documentation about what happened on the day of the Hillsborough tragedy.

As has been heard today, every football fan knows where they were on that fateful day. I think I am the third Sheffield Wednesday fan among Members to speak today, and I am delighted to follow such excellent and moving contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I was a 10-year-old boy at the time of that semi-final, and I note that my dad was serving on Sheffield city council with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East. On that day I was playing football in the garden of my friend who was a Liverpool fan, and I remember the opening reports talking of a riot having occurred. Quite quickly, we got a different picture, but it was striking and it has stayed with me all this time that there was talk about a riot because that was the assumption—that that was what must have happened and caused the disturbance and the spilling over of people.

One of the most powerful speeches I have heard in this place or elsewhere was that of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who put so well how that initial misunderstanding was immediately followed by a campaign of mistruths and lies. Even now, we are still seeking the full truth and the documents that will set out why ambulances were refused entry to the ground. We want to find out what happened with the failings in safety procedures and why Hillsborough did not have a safety certificate. It is good to hear that my club, Sheffield Wednesday, is co-operating fully and I hope that it operates a policy of full disclosure—as should all relevant organisations, whether or not they are covered by the Freedom of Information Act. I hope that all concerned will make available absolutely everything that is required to allow the panel and the families to see exactly what happened.

As 10-year-olds, we are mad about our teams. We are proud of anything that our teams do; it does not matter whether they are any good, which, increasingly, with the fate of Sheffield Wednesday, is probably a good thing. A generation of Wednesday fans and I have grown up with the ground that they love being infamous around the world as a symbol of tragedy. That is a strange thing for any football fan to come to terms with. As young boys, we tried to understand and assimilate the grief that we saw from the football fans around us.

I grew up as a season-ticket holder on the south stand for most of the time and, latterly, on the Kop, sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East. I hope that the annual visit of Liverpool FC, which, obviously, does not happen any more, will return one day. Annual tributes were paid at the Leppings Lane end. The fact that part of the ground will always be synonymous with tragedy is absolutely right, given the gravity of what happened there, which profoundly affected a generation of fans.

It is worth briefly reflecting on the change that has happened in football, largely as a result of the tragedy. Let us remember that the Football Spectators Act 1989 would have required compulsory identity cards and was only repealed as a result of Hillsborough. There have been so many vivid recollections of the horror of that day, which people who were there experienced and others saw on their TV screens. We remember the spikes at Hillsborough in the Leppings Lane end and across the country. It is worth reflecting on just how different the game is now, the improvements that have been made and the change in attitude, which so many hon. Members have talked about today and which was abhorrent at the time. It is absolutely right that we have been able to move on from those days.

Liverpool FC is important in Barrow and Furness, the constituency that I represent. In Barrow, everyone is a Barrow soccer fan. We are in the conference. People tend to have a second team as well, and there are loads of scousers who go down to Anfield nearly every other week—nearly as many reds as go down to Old Trafford, but that is the case wherever we go. One of Liverpool's greatest captains, Emlyn Hughes, was a Barrow lad. He was eventually signed in 1964 by Blackpool, Barrow having passed up the chance to sign him. There is a statue of him in pride of place in Barrow, and he was, of course, at the game in 1989, so I want to end with a simple tribute that was left, along with red roses, at the Emlyn Hughes statue in Barrow on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the tragedy. Two people who did not give their names wrote a simple note saying:

> "In memory of the 96 who lost their lives at Hillsborough on 15 April 1989 from two who were spared that day in the Leppings Lane End. You'll never walk alone."

9.24 pm

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate, and I start with a confession: I was one of those—there were close to 140,000 of us—who signed the e-petition. I was not sure whether we were supposed to be able to petition ourselves, but I did it, and I hope that it does not get me into too much trouble.

I want to place on record my appreciation, which I know is shared by many others—everyone in the Chamber and, I am sure, all those listening and watching at home and in the Gallery—for the unstinting dedication and commitment to the issue displayed by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram). He spoke with great feeling and passion in opening the debate, having over the past 22 years been involved in a long campaign for justice for the 96 victims of the events of April 1989.

Many others have expressed their views as fans of Liverpool, as people present at the game on that day, or as people who represent communities and individuals personally affected by the disaster, and we have heard the power of their testimony this evening. We have heard of the impact not only on Liverpool and the surrounding area, but on Sheffield, and one particular part of it that will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said, for ever be associated with the most senseless, tragic and unforgivable loss of life, when people left their home that afternoon to watch a football match and never returned.

As others have said, in debating this issue we should not forget the context of the time. Football had been scarred by trouble in and around grounds for close to 20 years. Facilities were often poor, owners were often

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disinterested in their clubs and, I have to say, Government at the time saw football as some sort of national disease, rather than a sport. It is sometimes easy to be nostalgic for football in the pre-premiership era, especially when that coincides with one's formative years, but football in the 1980s was alien to many people. It was often unloved, unappreciated and unwelcome.

Thousands of people in this country watch football matches at weekends. They did in the 1980s, too. On 15 April 1989, I was among those who did. Like those at Hillsborough, that afternoon I stood on a concrete terrace, largely unchanged since it was opened decades earlier, with metal crash barriers and high, angled fences between the pitch and the crowd. It was my good fortune that, unlike those people at Hillsborough, I was standing on a terrace that was largely empty. There were 4,949 other people on that day in grounds that were licensed to hold 30,000-odd. All 4,950 people who arrived at Craven Cottage that day left for home alive; that is how it should be at every football match, but that afternoon for 96 people it was not.

Many of us who were at the football on that day left knowing that something had gone terribly, badly wrong in south Yorkshire that afternoon. We were soon to find that football was about to change for ever. I will never forget the sense of emptiness, and of the irrelevance of the spectacle of the match that I was watching, as we stood on the terrace and heard—in those days, it was from people with radios—first that there was a pitch invasion at the FA cup semi-final; then that the game had been held up; then that people were spilling on to the pitch; then that there was a riot; then that people were injured; and then that advertising hoardings were being used as stretchers. It was only over the course of the evening and the next day that the scale of what had happened in Sheffield became apparent. Even then, reports—media reports, briefings from the police, statements from football authorities—all to a greater or lesser extent suggested that the deaths were precipitated by drunken fans, supporters arriving late, or spectators without tickets, or with the wrong tickets.

The undercurrent was obvious: it was the fault of fans—violent thugs who knew no better. The most infamous manifestation of that was the disgraceful reporting in *The Sun* that week, which we have heard about. As others have said, there were made-up quotes, invented incidents and fictional accounts designed to blacken the name of people who were in Sheffield to watch a football match. That is absolutely disgraceful.

Given that background, it is little wonder that the terminology of injustice is used because it is unjust for people to be condemned without evidence. It is unjust to be publicly blamed as culpable of the deaths of those one stood with watching a sporting fixture. It is unjust to be written off by authorities seeking to avoid responsibility. That sense of injustice needs to be addressed today.

As we all know, although Lord Justice Taylor dismissed many of these stories out of hand as baseless, and firmly established the culpability of South Yorkshire police in his report, that sense of injustice remains today. It remains because of the claim by the match commander David Duckenfield that fans forced open the exit gate that led to the crush in the central pen, when that was his own terrible decision. It remains because of the disappearance of CCTV tapes from the control room—tapes showing what happened in the Leppings Lane end of the ground. It remains because of the verdict of accidental death rather than unlawful killing.

Many others have spoken of various inadequacies and the fact that the police fixation with alcohol seemed to have the upper hand. A sense of injustice remains because of the statement by the then Prime Minister's press spokesman that he had "learned on the day" that the cause was "a tanked-up mob" of Liverpool fans. It remains because of the records of police officers' statements having been doctored by senior officers of South Yorkshire police. It remains because the documents placed in this House seem incomplete—there are no memos between senior police officers, or the police and their solicitors, for example. It remains because of the Government's discussions during those days still not having been released.

That sense of injustice can be righted only by the full and complete disclosure of documents held by the Government, South Yorkshire police and the other relevant authorities. Where doubt remains, that disclosure can help to bring clarity. Where suspicion lingers, that disclosure can help to bring confirmation. Where there is still grief—I know there is still grief—that disclosure can help people to move towards resolution.

One of the great privileges of being a Member of this House is the opportunity to stand in the Chamber and speak up for what is right. There are countless examples of Members of this Chamber doing that in our history and helping to right historic wrongs. This evening, it is important that the House speaks with one clear and consistent voice. Those who should have been given answers 22 years ago, who feel the pain every day of their lives, who are here today and watching the debate in such numbers deserve the truth. They deserve the full truth and they deserve it now.

9.32 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I have been listening in appropriate awe to the brilliance of the speeches, particularly from the Members from Sheffield, Liverpool and around Merseyside, which is highly appropriate to the subject. They have delivered in terms of the quality of the argument and the eloquence with which they have put it. I trust that those who edit and those who own *The Sun* will be listening in to the debate and will be preparing their front pages in anticipation.

I am one of those who, for the past 25 years and more, has never allowed a copy of *The Sun* into my house. Whether I will again or not I do not know, so perhaps I will not see the apology that is due, but it is due because the evil committed by that newspaper shocked any decent person in this country.

I was asked to speak in this debate by one of my constituents, who pressed me repeatedly. One could hear the trauma in the e-mails that she sent me, repeatedly demanding, first, that I sign in support. I told her that I already had done so and had done in the previous Parliament. Then she said, "I need you to be there. I need you to be representing me at the debate." I said I would be there. Then she said, "I need you to speak in the debate." I represent the nearest Nottinghamshire constituency to Hillsborough and have many Sheffield Wednesday and Nottingham Forest supporters and a handful of Liverpool supporters in it. I have no idea which team she went to support that day.

I remember listening on my little radio to what was going on that day and recalling the only time I had stood in the Leppings Lane end for a semi-final, which had been a few years before. When I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), I remembered going through that tunnel. I cannot remember whether we were in section 3 or 4, but I remember more and more people coming in until we could scarcely move or breathe. Then, all the little kids, including my brother, who was tiny at the time—I was not much bigger—had to be lifted up, passed on hundreds of people's hands and put down to the front because there were no crash barriers then. Probably thousands of people had to be moved on to the side of the pitch that day. That was some years before, so the lessons had not been learned.

I can think of other stadiums, not only in Sheffield, where I have been in similar situations. As a kid I used to be put on a stool; I started on a stool that was bigger than I was and then moved to one that was a bit smaller. I have been in stadiums where I stood on my stool, lost it in the first few minutes and did not get it back until after full time, but I went backwards and forwards and my feet never touched the ground.

I recall going to places like Chelsea in the '80s and seeing the venom directed against ordinary football supporters, particularly visiting supporters, as though they were some sort of scum who should not be there. That was the climate that existed at the time and that was how football fans on all sides would have been seen there. There are many members and supporters of Nottingham Forest in my constituency, and every one of them stands alongside the supporters of Liverpool football club, as do all other supporters across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton said, "There but for the grace of God go we." Was it the toss of a coin that decided who went in one end and who went in the other, because it will have been no more scientific than that? Every time I have been to semi-finals at the same ground I have ended up in different ends each time. There is no science to it; it is luck. It is only a matter of luck that it was not Nottingham Forest supporters in the Leppings Lane end that day. That is the point.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Mann: My hon. Friend wants to join me in making this point on behalf of football supporters across Nottinghamshire. It could have been our supporters who were there.

Vernon Coaker: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is really important that the people of Sheffield and, above all, the people of Liverpool, the families of the 96, the supporters of Liverpool football club and all decent people across the country know that the people of Nottinghamshire and Nottingham and the fans of Nottingham Forest stand absolutely with them today in their horror at what happened on that awful day and in their support for the motion before the House?

John Mann: There is not a supporter of any football club anywhere in the country, and certainly not a supporter of Nottingham Forest, who does not stand shoulder to shoulder with the fans and the people of Liverpool in demanding the truth and demanding justice, because it could easily have been on the toss of a coin that Nottingham Forest supporters were in the Leppings Lane end on that fateful day, and exactly the same thing would have happened. That tragedy was nothing whatever to do with the fans and supporters of Liverpool football club—nothing whatever. They just happened to be the unlucky ones—the ones in the wrong place at the wrong time, when the wrong decisions were made by people in authority. Any of us who went to football matches could have been there.

I have seen a vast amount of football. I have seen Liverpool football club, up at Anfield and elsewhere, and I have never once wanted them to win a game when I have been there, and to be honest I never will, but there is no finer set of football fans—football supporters—in this country or anywhere else in the world. That is the quality of the people of Liverpool, that is the quality of the people who support Liverpool football club, and that is why all the football world, not least the supporters of Nottingham Forest, stands alongside them.

We have had progress. We want to see full justice. These people deserve justice, and it is about time it happened.

9.40 pm

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): I did not intend to take part in the debate, but I am very grateful for the opportunity to do so.

I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on, and acknowledge his role in, securing this debate. He has been a Member for only a short period, but he has already proved himself a champion not only of this issue but of the whole city of Liverpool.

I also thank and am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who has demonstrated that principles still stand in politics. He was prepared to put his neck on the line to make sure that the 96 received justice, so he should be praised for his actions when he was a member of the previous Government.

I acknowledge the role of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who has been an active campaigner on the issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg), who has not been named so far but who played an important role in negotiations between the families and the then Government to set up the original inquiry.

It is important that we do not just pat ourselves on the back, however, and I know that this debate would not have happened without the active campaigning of the families of the 96 or, indeed, the Liverpool fans themselves. Liverpool fans not just in the UK but throughout the world have taken part in the campaign, and the families would also like us to put on record their thanks to the club and to the manager, who have steadfastly supported the campaign from day one. The club has given them great assistance over a long period.

I have a personal interest, which I spoke about earlier in the debate, because unfortunately I lost one of my good pals, David Hawley, in the tragedy. We grew up

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together. We went to pubs, clubs and regularly to the match, but I lost contact with Davey for many years, and I did not make contact with him until a couple of weeks before the Hillsborough tragedy. I had not seen him for some years, but he walked up to me, we recognised each other—surprisingly!—and we arranged to meet.

Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to meet David Hawley, have a social drink with him and remember the old days, because the next time I had any contact with him was when his funeral was held, and I know from that funeral the devastating effect of the tragedy on his direct family and his friends, who were all in the church. I remember seeing a packed church and representatives of Liverpool football club, all there paying tribute to a man for whom I had a great deal of admiration, and I was sorry that I did not have a chance to have that last drink with him.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). Her speech was both passionate and from the heart, and I am not surprised that the families identified with it. It demonstrates that there are still people in the House who do things with a passion and from the heart, and I congratulate her on an outstanding speech.

This debate has already achieved something. It has proved that there was responsibility for the problems that arose. The mistakes were made by a range of different groups of people—the police, the emergency services, the football authorities, and many others—but no one can identify that it was the fault of football fans or the result of Liverpool fans' actions. If the debate does nothing else, it will give wide media coverage to the fact that this had nothing to do with Liverpool fans.

A number of people are responsible for the view that Liverpool fans were responsible for the disaster, and that issue would be covered by the release of information from the Government. However, we also need all the media outlets to reveal the source of the information that they used in the days after the tragedy. It is crucial that the information is put on the public record so that we know why they wrote such terrible stories about Liverpool fans and about the disaster. Nearly all the media outlets now accept that their stories were irresponsible and untrue, but there is one man who still has not made that apology: Kelvin MacKenzie. Quite frankly, he should make that apology tomorrow, publicly, and if he does not every media outlet in this country should ban him completely and never give him time again.

I congratulate everyone in the House on the debate. I also congratulate the Government. They came under a great deal of pressure from this House and beyond to publish the full details, and I am very pleased that they are now going to do that. The whole House is united about getting all the information and all the documents out as quickly as possible so that we can draw a line under this issue.

9.46 pm

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I will be very brief because I want to leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) to wind up, but there are a few things that I would like to put on record. First, the whole House will congratulate my hon. Friend on an amazingly powerful and emotional speech. I do not think there have been many speeches in my 19 years here when there were so many damp eyes in the Chamber, and that is understandable given the circumstances.

When I moved to the north-west from Portsmouth in 1977, Liverpool supporters told me, "You'll now learn about football", and to a certain extent that was very true. However, it was my late neighbour, the late Cliff Lloyd, a one-time secretary of the Professional Footballers Association who was on Liverpool's books as a schoolboy before the second world war, who told me about the stools that my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) mentioned. That is intriguing. In both the houses I have lived in during that time, a little stool was there, and it was for Dad to take along with him for his lad so that he could see the match. Those stools were used on the terraces in Liverpool by families who went for a family occasion and enjoyed their game.

I want to contrast that—the truth of the sport of football and the passion there is on the terraces—with what was said by the police, by *The Sun*, and by several other commentators. The contrast is so stark that we need to sit back, reflect and ask ourselves what drove the police leadership to get things so wrong—to encourage people to amend their statements. These are very serious issues. I am delighted that the Home Secretary has given such a positive response and that, I hope, we are going to get to the bottom of those issues.

We should contrast that with the way in which newspapers such as *The Sun* got it so wrong. What gave them the right to publish such disgusting filth when people had died? That is no way for responsible media to operate. Whatever happens at the end of Bishop James Jones's inquiry, we have to reflect on this matter as a House. How can we ensure that the media take a more responsible view when they report on tragedies?

As has been said, we have given Bishop James Jones rather a lot to do given the responsibilities of the inquiries he is chairing. I hope that the Home Secretary will confirm that the Government want him to give this task the highest priority among the inquiries he is conducting into forestry and other issues. This matter is of such importance that we should encourage him to give it the highest possible priority.

I want to put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who has been unstinting in raising this issue before public audiences. He spoke in my constituency a couple of months ago. In very emotional terms, he described what he saw as the roles of Parliament and Government in addressing this terrible tragedy and injustice. I hope that his role will not be forgotten, nor that of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle). The two of them have been extraordinary.

I also want to comment on my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) who, as has been said, was at the tragic game. He is always an unassuming individual. He has taught me a lot about the events of the day. I congratulate him on being persistent in pressing this case.

We face a set of circumstances that require total openness. Today we have discussed the issues of data protection and redaction. The Home Secretary has been very positive. Many Members will know that I was quite heavily involved in bringing the Data Protection Act 1998 together from the Data Protection Act 1984 and the European directive. Unless, as the Home Secretary said, family members have specific reasons to request that the bishop does not publish certain things, there is no reason under the 1998 Act why anything other than minor details, such as signatures, should be withheld from the public gaze. We need to ensure that if anything is done beyond those reasons, it is annotated to record why it has been done. I would ask the bishop to think about how he could do that, so that anyone who has the slightest suspicion about any redaction can be comfortable about why it has occurred.

The list read out by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton was powerful and emotional. On that point, I think it is appropriate for the House to give the last few minutes to him, because he has done the House a tremendous service by raising this case today.

Hon. Members: Hear! Hear!

9.54 pm

Steve Rotheram: I thank all colleagues who have taken part in tonight's debate. I said at the start of my speech, three and a bit hours ago, that the issue of Hillsborough would not go away, and Members can see for themselves what it means to the families who have joined us in the House tonight. Members from across the country have most eloquently articulated their constituents' thoughts on the disaster.

Today has been the most emotional and most rewarding day of my short parliamentary career. You, Mr Speaker, said on the day you were elected Speaker of this great House that you believed Members were, by and large, "upright, decent, honourable people", looking to improve the lives and change the lot of their fellow citizens in this country. Tonight, I hope I speak on behalf of all the family members present, and the millions of people across Merseyside and much further afield who support them, when I say that Members in all parts of the House—those who signed the petition, those who will support the motion and those who have spoken in the debate—have made a difference to those families' lives. For that, I will be for ever grateful.

I am grateful also to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), an Evertonian who has pursued the cause of justice over the past few years with the tenacity that only he could have brought to the job.

I spoke earlier of the eternal flame of solidarity among the people of Liverpool, but tonight I was moved by the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith). It is clear that they are Sheffield through and through, and that, like ours, their city continues to live under the dark cloud of the events of April 1989.

I am grateful to Members who have contributed. I have already received texts from many people, including Jamie Carragher and Kenny Dalglish, praising the House. I was also pleased to see Joey Barton, who did so much to promote the e-petition, join us in the Public Gallery tonight, as well as Andy Gray and Richard Keys of talkSPORT, who have promoted the issues that we have raised in the House tonight on their radio show in the build-up to the debate. I would also like to thank successive managers of Liverpool and Everton football clubs, who have so effectively used their profiles over the years to support and promote the cause, especially David Moyes, who attended the 20th anniversary service. The players who played on that fateful day also felt the effect of the tragedy, none more so than John Aldridge, who has been unstinting in his support for the families.

I want to give special thanks, of course, to the families and to all the Merseyside MPs—my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), the hon. Member for Wirral West (Esther McVey), my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr Field), my hon. Friends the Members for Halton (Derek Twigg), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), whose contribution was brilliantly moving. They know more than most the depth of feeling in our region about the fateful day, and they will be grateful for the giant strides that the fight for justice has taken tonight. I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), for her indulgence and advice throughout the process.

Some 100 MPs signed the petition that triggered tonight's debate. Successive Governments made terrible mistakes. Tonight, this Parliament, when given the chance, got it right. When I began the fight for this debate, the families told me that all they had ever wanted was the truth. Tonight we moved a step closer to fulfilling their wish, and I hope that 96 souls will be resting a little easier.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls for the full disclosure of all government-related documents, including Cabinet minutes, relating to the 1989 Hillsborough disaster; requires that such documentation be uncensored and without redaction; and further calls for the families of the 96 and the Hillsborough Independent Panel to have unrestricted access to that information.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have heard a lot tonight about the conduct of News International in 1989. In the light of its recent conduct and its coming in front of a Select Committee, would it be in order for that Select Committee to ask News International to come before it to answer questions about its activities back in 1989?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is that Select Committees are at liberty to ask witnesses to appear before them in relation to inquiries upon which they have decided. I hope that that answer is instructive to him and to the House. They can do as they wish, and people are morally obliged and expected to co-operate with parliamentary Committees that are going about public business as they see fit.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (NOVEMBER 2011, CHRISTMAS AND FEBRUARY 2012)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Tuesday 15 November 2011, do adjourn till Monday 21 November 2011; at its rising on Tuesday 20 December 2011, do adjourn till Tuesday 10 January 2012; and at its rising on Thursday 9 February 2012, do adjourn till Monday 20 February 2012.—*(Stephen Crabb.)*

The Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 19 October (Standing Order No. 41A).

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Sir George Young relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—*(Stephen Crabb.)*

Tower Hamlets (City Status)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Stephen Crabb.)*

10.1 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the Tower Hamlets city status bid, and I welcome the Minister. I know that his reaction must be neutral, so in reality, this will not be much of a debate. It is none the less good to see him—he is highly regarded on both sides of the House.

It is also good to see the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field) in the Chamber. He represents London's two existing cities. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and I—she cannot be with us tonight—would be very happy were Her Majesty to allow us to represent just one city between us. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can offer us some advice and assistance on how to get there.

The east end has always been special in many ways. Today, however, Tower Hamlets is a reflection of Britain and the Commonwealth—a centre for global business and multiculturalism. The borough has come a long way since the blitz. Tower Hamlets has been transformed during the decades of Her Majesty's reign, adapting from the industry of the docks and the merchant navy to become an internationally recognised world centre for trading, business and banking, and a celebrated tourism hub.

We have over two millennia of history and share more than a thousand years with royalty. Now as before, but in a different way, we are a powerhouse for the United Kingdom's well-being. We are the third central business district for the heart of London, alongside London's west end and the Corporation of London, both cities of which are represented by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster, as I have said.

Our new economy creates an economic surplus that contributes through Government tax distribution to many of the poorer parts of Britain. We are proud to be able to make that contribution, having experienced hard times ourselves in the past—we still have deprived areas today.

On the history of our part of east London, the iconic Tower of London symbolises our strong and enduring links with the monarchy. Founded by William the Conqueror, it is the country's oldest royal palace. The constable of the tower has the right of direct access to the sovereign, and of course it is home to the Crown jewels.

Tower Hamlets locations feature in royal and maritime chronology. The first ships to establish English-speaking settlements in north America left Blackwall stairs in 1606, 13 years before the pilgrim fathers left the south-west. Four hundred years later, almost symmetrically, the major US banks, with others, now occupy Canary Wharf. Famous navigators and explorers such as Sir Martin Frobisher sailed from Blackwall and the Ratcliff highway—now the King Edward VII memorial park—to advance British trade and fight on behalf of the Crown. The Royal Naval Reserve's "stone frigate", HMS President, was commissioned in November 1903, and is now at St Katharine's way, close to Tower bridge. The Isle of Dogs was home to the royal stables for King Charles II's Greenwich palace. Victoria park was established as

London's first public park in 1850, and named after Queen Victoria. A petition signed by 30,000 residents requested a royal park in the area because of the lack of green space in the east end.

In world war two, east-enders endured the terrible onslaught of Hitler's blitz. The bombing was more painful as it followed the poverty of the economic depressions in the 1920s and 1930s. The people were fortified by the royal family's visits, and by the shared experience of their suffering. Her Majesty's mother, Queen Elizabeth, almost perversely, commented positively after Buckingham palace itself was bombed, saying:

> "I am glad…now we can look the East End in the eye".

In 1945, during two days of joy following VE day, the royal family celebrated with Poplar and Limehouse.

The royal family has maintained its links with the east end, and family members have taken an active interest in the area's regeneration. The Prince's Trust has been an assiduous partner in local initiatives, and Her Majesty herself opened the first stage of the Docklands light railway in 1987, and Poplar marina a decade later. She and His Royal Highness Prince Philip have also visited on other occasions. The ecumenical priorities of the royal family are a basis of staunch support from Tower Hamlets, as a multi-faith community. This was demonstrated at the recent royal wedding celebrations, which were organised and attended by people from all religions and backgrounds.

Our prosperity as London's engine room has always been linked with London's priorities as the nation's primary trading centre, and now as a world city. We have moved from physical trade to international banking, creative industries, media, pharmaceuticals and company headquarters, and Tower Hamlets is now a leading world centre, with the City Fringe and Canary Wharf. Our economic turnover is now over £6 billion annually. Small and medium-sized enterprises on, and servicing, Canary Wharf, as well as traditional businesses, provide employment for thousands of people. Our inward-commuting population is more than 120,000 daily, and will rise to more than 200,000 by 2020. There will be 300,000 jobs in Tower Hamlets by then. Already, Tower Hamlets offers the largest number of jobs in the United Kingdom outside the cities of Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield, and London's two other cities.

The Thames and Lea rivers, and the legacy of the Roman roads, were our early business arteries and our communities' raison d'être. We still have the largest "blue network" of any London borough. The upper docks were a vital part of Britain's maritime trade from the 1800s to the 1970s. London's first canal—the Regent's canal or Prince Regent's canal—and early railways such as the London and Blackwall were built to serve the docks and carry national, imperial and international trade. Our markets, including Spitalfields, were the centrepiece of the capital's provisioning. In 1982, Billingsgate fish market relocated to Tower Hamlets.

For international air and rail connections, we are neighbours to London City airport and Stratford International, and we will be only 40 minutes from Heathrow airport when Crossrail opens. All built-up areas in Tower Hamlets are within walking distance of a railway, a Docklands light railway, a tube or an overground station, and the Mayor of London's cycle scheme is following. We can therefore support major growth environmentally in the decades to follow, and 170 million passenger journeys start or finish at our 30 stations yearly.

Tower Hamlets has a fascinating social, cultural and political history. A core test of strong community leadership is an enduring concern for the well-being of its citizens of all ages. Trade and social cohesion do not always rub shoulders comfortably in a major urban area. Poverty, slum housing, poor health and crime have all been present locally and, sadly, some aspects are still evident. Tower Hamlets council and its predecessors have a distinguished and continuing tradition of increasing democracy and rights for working people, including the Poplar rebels of the 1920s. The roll call locally is packed with social reform, equality, emancipation and self-improvement of communities, transforming them into our 21st-century society.

In the middle ages, Wat Tyler met King Richard II at Mile End during the peasants' revolt, where the king acceded to a petition for better payments and social conditions. In Victorian times, the Chartists and local dockers, campaigning to improve industrial and social conditions, met at Victoria park. The Toynbee Hall organisation has worked on social and welfare reform since the end of the 19th century. Clement Attlee MP, one of my predecessors, was MP for Limehouse and became Prime Minister, championing welfare reform. In early 2011, the current Prime Minister announced the coalition Government's plans for welfare reform at Toynbee Hall.

The Boundary estate in Bethnal Green opened in 1900 and was the world's first council housing, built on the site of one of the capital's most notorious slums, the Old Nichol. The Peabody estate in Commercial street was the first social housing, while the Lansbury estate in Poplar was a post-war prototype and is still going strong.

Sylvia Pankhurst settled in Bow at the beginning of world war one. With suffragette colleagues, she set up a cut-price restaurant, a milk centre, a toy factory and a nursery school. This provided local women and children with what they needed; the women worked in the munitions factories and on public transport, as their husbands and men-folk went to war. In other examples, the first women to form a trade union did so at Bryant and May's match factory in Bow; the Salvation Army was founded by Charles Booth in the east end; and Mahatma Gandhi stayed in Kingsley hall in Bow in 1930s—a place that now houses the Gandhi Foundation.

New communities have always shaped Tower Hamlets. The east end has had a wide impact on British national identity through the archetypal cheeky Cockney and the resourceful, never-give-up, east-ender attitude. However, this is just its starting point. At the trading crossroads for the oceans, we have led the proud tradition of integrating migrants. Spitalfields' origins were the migrants during Roman times, and I mentioned the Normans and William the Conqueror's Tower of London. Through the centuries, our arrivals have included many thousands from across the British empire and the Commonwealth. The original London Chinatown was in Limehouse. Religious persecutions caused others to seek refuge with us: French Huguenots at the end of the 17th century and east European Jews in the 19th century. Economic needs and famine stimulated the arrival of many Catholics from Ireland and, more recently, we have seen the

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

arrival of Bangladeshi Muslims. These new communities, defined by their faith and ethnicity, have created strong infrastructures around family and work—firm foundations for our city. The diverse population, cultures and identities reflect those of the wider 21st-century Britain. We now have the youngest population of any London local authority.

That rich background has stimulated a shining example of Tower Hamlets' distinctiveness. One building that best tells the diverse religious history of Tower Hamlets, is the "Brick Lane mosque", which was originally founded as a church for the Huguenots, but later used by Methodists. In the late 19th century, it was converted into the Machzikei Adass, also known as the Spitalfields Great synagogue, but as the Jewish community moved out to be replaced by Bengali immigrants, it became the Jamme Masjid or the Great London mosque in 1976. We also have the east London mosque in Whitechapel and no fewer than three Hawksmoor churches in the borough. Royal ensigns have permission to fly—the white ensign at St Anne's in Limehouse, the red ensign at St Dunstan's in Stepney, as well as the blue ensign at the floating church of St Peter's in the docks.

Most recently, the regeneration of the area, overseen by the London Docklands Development Corporation, has caused the riverside populations to be reborn, with renovations and adaptation of older buildings and the construction of new homes, bringing many thousands of new residents to the area. That stimulation and new investment has extended inland to centres such as Spitalfields, Whitechapel, Bow and Victoria park—and, of course, Tower Hamlets is one of London's Olympic boroughs.

Tower Hamlets' experiences with community activism in past times are paying dividends as we look to the future. At the 1936 battle of Cable street, 300,000 people blocked Oswald Mosley's fascists from marching on the local Jewish community. Today there are some 2,500 community groups working within Tower Hamlets, delivering a vast range of services to local people, ranging from small self-help groups run by volunteers, to larger organisations delivering public sector contracts. Our thriving third sector is a reflection of our vitality and community spirit, which is inspired by our origins. There was stability in Tower Hamlets during the riots that took place elsewhere in the United Kingdom during the 1980s and 1990s, and most recently we were pretty much spared the violence seen in so many parts of the UK.

The sustaining core of the east end's future will be our young people, and ensuring that they are educated, skilled, experienced and adaptable. Our secondary schools are benefiting from a £290 million investment to create world-class learning environments for our children. Our schools have moved in the last 15 years, and are now among the highest-performing in Britain. Education and training-related courses can be taken in the borough's idea stores—formerly libraries—and higher educational opportunities are available in Tower Hamlets at Queen Mary and Westfield college, part of the University of London, at London Metropolitan university, and at Tower Hamlets college.

We are profoundly keen for our new generations to be politically articulate, and the council has organised and held annual elections for a "Young Mayor" since 2008. The most recent election, in January 2011, saw a record turnout of 52.4% of young people, a higher turnout than those in some recent mainstream elections. We have a directly elected executive mayoral system of local government.

Tower Hamlets has always had a high-profile artistic identity. Among our residents are Dame Helen Mirren, Sir Ian McKellen, Tracey Emin and Gilbert and George, and 3 Mills Studios in Bromley-by-Bow are London's largest film and television studios. The Old Truman Brewery is now host to many creative businesses, and we have a number of artists' colonies including Trinity Buoy Wharf, where Faraday experimented with electricity. For over a century the Whitechapel gallery has showcased the work of world-renowned artists such as Picasso, Jackson Pollock and Lucian Freud. The Museum of London Docklands is considered to be one of London's hidden treasures, and addresses the history of the capital as a port. Children locally are encouraged to visit the V&A Museum of Childhood, which was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1872, to see its collection of childhood-related objects dating back to the 1600s. Wilton's Music Hall, which opened in 1858 in Wapping, is the oldest surviving Grand Music Hall in the world, and is Grade II listed. However, the jewel of all our buildings is the one that I mentioned at the start, which is home to the Crown Jewels.

One of Britain's most striking and famous historical landmarks, the Tower of London, is now a world heritage site attracting more than 2 million visitors a year. Other high-profile buildings include the Canary Wharf skyscrapers, the Old Truman Brewery, the old and new parts of the Royal London hospital, the northern half of Tower Bridge—I would not want to claim Southwark's southern half—and the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, which cast the Big Ben bell, as well as the bells of many cathedrals and parish churches and others further afield. I am told that it also cast the Liberty Bell, which, as we know, is famously cracked. During the American quadricentennial celebrations, a stunt was organised by Americans who handed out leaflets outside the foundry asking for their money back. The foundry showed its sense of humour: they were told that they could certainly have their money back provided that the goods were returned in the original packaging.

Some of our street markets are known worldwide and are major destinations for residents, Londoners and tourists alike, such as the Columbia Road flower market and the Whitechapel, Petticoat Lane, Spitalfields and Billingsgate markets. The Roman Road, Watney and Chrisp Street markets are well known throughout the east end. Food is a symbol of Tower Hamlets' many cultures, whether it is sold in the local pie and mash shops, at Tubby Isaac's jellied eel stall, in the bagel bakeries or in the curry houses. The Olympic organisers have just named Brick lane as Curry Capital 2012.

Events take place in Tower Hamlets throughout the year. The Baishakhi Mela, a festival to celebrate the Bengali new year, is the largest carnival in the UK after the Notting Hill carnival, and more than 100,000 people turned up in 2010. Lovebox, a music festival held in Victoria park, attracts star performers and plays to over 100,000 people, and Canary Wharf sponsors a year-round arts and events programme encompassing music, sport, visual art, food, fashion and dance.

Many excellent towns and boroughs are seeking Her Majesty's pleasure and approval to be named a city in 2012, her diamond jubilee year. As the Minister knows, Tower Hamlets is in very good company, and whichever area Her Majesty chooses will be worthy of the title. My speech is intended to draw attention to some of the stronger reasons for the view held by many of us that Tower Hamlets has an excellent case to make. Our bid has the support of all our major political parties.

A city is defined through its deeds, its concern for citizens and its central roles. We have a powerful track record of managing and behaving as a city, with national and world impacts in business, and a profound and strong cultural and social record at a human level.

We hope that Her Majesty will choose Tower Hamlets because we foresee more investment and economic growth coming from city status with its new united identity. These gains will be re-invested back into our communities and our people, and towards the wider London and national well-being. Our vision is built on our multicultural, multi-faith approach to social development, and our aim to be the leading example of how Britain can best influence the dynamics of the world in the 21st century, and I am grateful to have had the chance to make these remarks.

10.20 pm

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on introducing this important debate. As he pointed out, I, rather greedily, have two cities in my constituency just to the west of his own. They are also rich in history, and I suspect I could bore Members for some hours by going into the details of that history. It was a great pleasure to listen to the hon. Gentleman's speech, in which he described, with understandable pride, the great achievements of Tower Hamlets. Although he spoke about its great history, he also had a firm eye on the future.

In light of the previous debate, it might be relevant to mention that one thing Tower Hamlets lacks is a league football club. We might, perhaps, hope that returns to its historical roots at some point by crossing the river again—although I suspect the local constabulary might not be too keen on that idea, particularly on derby days when Millwall plays West Ham United.

However, although the hon. Gentleman made relevant points about Tower Hamlets, I hope we will consider granting city status to other candidates too, so that we do not give the nod to just one new city next year. Reading is my home town, and that is one of the other places in the running, and I also think there is a strong case for Croydon. If it were a self-standing entity rather than a London borough, it would be the ninth largest settlement in the UK.

The case for Tower Hamlets is strong. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the financial district that has grown up from nothing over the past 20 years makes a great case for its having city status, and so does its great history. For those purists who want there to be a cathedral, there are the three Hawksmoor churches. St George-in-the-East and the others would all happily fit the bill.

However, the hon. Gentleman's most important statement in promoting Tower Hamlets was that we should look to the future. The great multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-racial mix that is Tower Hamlets, with the great change we are seeing in that part of our capital city, deserves to be recognised as an example of how our cities should be.

The hon. Gentleman referred to some of the political controversies and difficulties of the 1920s and 1930s, when Poplar was one of the constituent borough councils of Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets has also had more recent political problems, and I hope that the prospect of city status will unite all political people in Tower Hamlets over the next year or so. I hope they will focus on that, rather than on some of the high profile difficulties of the recent past.

I wish the hon. Gentleman Godspeed with his campaign and look forward to hearing the Minister's response to what has been an excellent short debate.

10.23 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr Mark Harper): As well as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), whom I congratulate on securing this debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field), two other Members are present, both of whom have an interest in that their own areas are bidding for city status. They will have listened with great interest to the hon. Gentleman's case.

The hon. Gentleman follows my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), for Reading West (Alok Sharma), for Southend West (Mr Amess) and for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) in securing a debate on his area's hopes for winning city status in the diamond jubilee competition for civic honours. I have learned many new things in the course of this debate, as I did in those previous debates. I think I am right in saying that this is the first such debate for which you, Mr Speaker, have been in the Chair. You will be pleased to know that there are 25 entries seeking city status. This is the fifth debate, so there are a further 20 debates to go if Members are as assiduous as those whom I have mentioned in seeking to make the case for their areas. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to learn that I can confirm that Tower Hamlets' entry into the diamond jubilee competition for civic honours has been safely received. As I said, it is one of 25 entries seeking city status and there are 12 entries seeking lord mayoralty status for existing cities. That shows a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and interest in the competition, and demonstrates how attractive such civic honours are to local communities.

The hon. Gentleman recognised at the beginning of his remarks that I can no more endorse the aspirations of Tower Hamlets than I could those of any of the other entrants in the competition. Ministers must remain impartial, as we must ensure that bestowing city status remains a real honour, fairly bestowed and that this remains a real competition. The reason why fairness is so important is that there are no hard and fast criteria for becoming a city. It is an honour granted by the sovereign, nowadays following a competition, as a rare mark of distinction. So reasons for success or failure in these competitions are never given, and city status is not something that towns can achieve just by ticking off a list of hard and fast criteria.

We see why that is when we consider the list of existing cities. Any attempt to draw up a list of hard and fast criteria would run into problems. Some cities in the UK are large and some are small. Some have conspicuously attractive and well-laid-out city centres, whereas that is less true of others. Some have wonderful cathedrals,

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universities, airports, underground systems or trams, whereas some may lack those physical features but boast a vibrant cultural life.

The Government have, however, set out some of the qualities that we would expect a new city to have, and the assessment will be made in the round, looking at those qualities. We would expect a new city to have a vibrant, welcoming community with an interesting history and a distinct identity. The hon. Gentleman eloquently set out Tower Hamlets' claim in those and other respects, and I can assure him and his constituents that their entry will receive a thorough and impartial appraisal of its merits, alongside the other entries in the competition. The assessment process is under way and the plan is to announce the results early in 2012, at the beginning of the diamond jubilee year. With that, this short debate—it was not much of a "debate", in the sense that there was not a huge difference of opinion—comes to an end. I again congratulate the hon. Gentleman for setting out very forcefully the case for his constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

10.27 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Tuesday 18 October 2011

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND TRANSPORT FOR LONDON (No. 2) BILL [*LORDS*] *(BY ORDER)*

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON (SUPPLEMENTAL TOLL PROVISIONS) BILL [*LORDS*] (*BY ORDER)*

Second Readings opposed and deferred until Tuesday 25 October (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Organ Donation

1. **Duncan Hames** (Chippenham) (LD): What plans he has to promote new initiatives to encourage organ donation. [74847]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Anne Milton): Sustained work at national, regional and local level has seen an increase in donor rates by some 28% since 2008. We continue to work with a large number of organisations, such as the Give and Let Live initiative in schools, which is run by NHS Blood and Transplant. Other initiatives include requiring people to answer a question about organ donation when applying for a driving licence and to sign on the organ donor register when applying for a European health insurance card or for a Boots advantage card. We also have specific initiatives within the black and minority ethnic populations, such as working with faith groups and local radio stations.

Duncan Hames: I recently met young campaigners from Sign Up, Speak Up, Save Lives whose organ donation campaign features on Channel 4's "Battlefront" programme. Will the Minister please meet Hope, Abby and me, together with the Minister responsible for constitutional reform, so that we may discuss with them both our idea of inviting people to join the organ donor register at the same time as they will soon be asked to join the electoral register?

Anne Milton: I congratulate Sign Up, Speak Up, Save Lives. I am happy to meet Hope, Abby and the hon. Gentleman, along with the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). The electoral registration form has been used as an opportunity. In 2000 there was a campaign called Vote for Life, which was stopped after about 15 months because of problems with the Representation of the People Act. I would be happy to revisit it and would enjoy an opportunity to discuss the matter further. Anything we can do to get those rates up matters.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): The reorganisation of NHS procurement has been described in a National Audit Office report as fragmented and poor value for money. The report shows—

Mr Speaker: Order. Is the hon. Gentleman inquiring about organ donation?

Grahame M. Morris: Sorry. I am referring to the next question.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): What discussion has the Minister had with Welsh Ministers who are bringing forward legislation for an opt-out system of organ donation? If she has had such discussions, what conclusions has she drawn?

Anne Milton: The Government will examine thoroughly the detail of any Assembly Bill when it is laid before the Assembly, but I urge Wales to look at the evidence. We can look back to what happened in Spain, where there was presumed consent for 10 years without any shift in organ donation rates. The issue is more complex than that. It is about organ donor transplant co-ordinators and increasing donations from emergency medicine. A number of measures need to be put in place to increase those rates.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my hon. Friend be kind enough to meet Mr Adam Crizzle, who was the original inspiration behind the Give and Let Live organ donation programme in schools, to see how the promotion of this excellent scheme might be further improved?

Anne Milton: I would be very happy to meet that gentleman. There is no doubt that promoting this in schools has a profound impact and is an opportunity to change people's attitudes to organ donation and, more importantly, makes families discuss it, which is critical. It is not just about signing on to the register.

Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Last week I had the opportunity to meet members of the Ticker club, an organisation of former heart patients who continue to provide support to patients at Wythenshawe hospital, a specialist centre for cardiac and thoracic surgery, including heart and lung transplants. They have strong opinions on organ donation, so will the Minister agree to involve such groups in ongoing campaigns to raise awareness of the benefits?

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has visited that hospital, and I am happy to work with any group. I reiterate the fact that we particularly need to work with black and minority ethnic groups, in which the rates of donation are truly dreadful: 23% of people on waiting lists are from black and minority ethnic communities, but only 1.2% of those on the register are from that same group. We need to do everything we can to improve those rates.

NHS Hospital Indebtedness

2. **Mr Rob Wilson** (Reading East) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce NHS hospital indebtedness. [74848]

14. **George Eustice** (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce NHS hospital indebtedness. [74861]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Andrew Lansley): The national health service is forecasting a surplus for 2011-12, but the previous Government left a legacy of up to six hospital trusts whose private finance initiative payments are a risk to their financial sustainability and up to 24 trusts with such high levels of debt, following years of bail-outs, that they might not meet tests of their future financial sustainability. We are working with all of those to identify their individual needs so that we can help trusts to achieve consistent standards of quality and financial sustainability, and I will make an announcement on that later this year.

Mr Rob Wilson: I thank my right hon. Friend for spelling out the appalling debt that some parts of the NHS inherited from the previous Government. Can he assure me and the House that this Government will deal with the root causes of hospital debt, rather than with the continuing bungs and bail-outs that the previous Government left?

Mr Lansley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are determined to root out poor performance, by which I mean not only that we should deal with waste, inefficiencies and poor value for money in the NHS, but that we must identify where standards and quality of care are being met. Both are equally important, and one depends on the other. He will know from the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust how important it is to sustain finances and quality through foundation trust status. We are seeking to ensure that many NHS trusts reach foundation trust status, something that the previous Government failed to achieve and we aim to achieve.

George Eustice: The Secretary of State will be aware of the indebtedness of the Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust, and that Cornwall as a whole has suffered a disadvantage for many years as a result of the previous Government's funding formula, having actually received less than the Department's target budget for many years. Does he agree that such factors should be taken into account when deciding how to reschedule the debts of such trusts?

Mr Lansley: My hon. Friend will know, from our conversations and from my visit to Cornwall and the Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust, the steps that we are taking alongside other NHS trusts to bring them up to high standards of care and financial sustainability. In that regard, the 3.1% increase in revenue allocations for the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly primary care trust between last year and this year will help Cornwall as a whole towards greater financial sustainability.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. On indebtedness, the National Audit Office has produced a report on NHS procurement in England, which it describes as "fragmented" and "poor value for money". The report shows that £500 million could be saved each year if trusts came together to buy products more collaboratively. Is this further evidence that the Government are wrong to pursue an agenda of competition, rather than co-operation?

Mr Lansley: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is completely wrong about that. In procurement throughout the NHS, what we have had is fragmentation, and what we need is better co-ordination. That is precisely why, since the election, for example, we have instituted a consistent bar-coding system, allowing procurement throughout the NHS to be undertaken more effectively; and why under the quality, innovation, prevention and productivity programme, the improvement in procurement —reducing the costs of procurement—is intended to achieve those savings and more.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Labour is proud of its legacy, with more than 100 new hospitals built to replace the crumbling Victorian buildings that we inherited in 1997, and it is not just the National Audit Office that has blown a hole in the Secretary of State's assertion that 22 hospital trusts are on the brink of financial collapse due to PFI. John Appleby of the King's Fund said:

> "The…pressures on hospitals are not to do with PFI but…the need to generate £20bn worth of productivity improvements."

Is not the real issue that the Secretary of State has tied up the NHS in a distracting and wasteful reorganisation that will cost more money than it will save, and take money away from patient care?

Mr Lansley: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Opposition Front-Bench position. We are looking forward to the exchanges with him and his colleagues, including during questions today.

Twenty-two trusts have told us, in the course of our looking at where the impediments are to their financial sustainability for the future, that the nature of the PFI contracts entered into by the previous Government is a significant problem in this respect. It is absolutely right for the NHS to build hospitals, which is why we are, for example, building a new hospital at Whitehaven in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. *[Interruption.]* I beg his pardon—in the constituency of the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed); we are building so many new hospitals. The nature of the PFI projects we enter into must be to provide value for money and be sustainable in the future. That is something that the previous Government failed to achieve.

Urgent Care

3. **Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): What representations he has received on the reorganisation of urgent care in the past six months. [74849]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): A search of the Department of Health's database revealed that 131 items of correspondence, and five parliamentary questions relating to the reorganisation of urgent care were received in the past six months. In addition, I have received three requests to meet MPs on this subject.

Steve Baker: Wycombe hospital is currently going through a consultation on a change to urgent care services, and it is doing so in the context of the betrayal felt after "Shaping Health Services" in 2004, which removed our accident and emergency department. I would like to escape this cycle through mutuality. What is the Government's position on mutuality? Will the Minister join my call for directly owned community health services?

Mr Burns: The Government have supported the right to request, which has enabled 45 staff-led social enterprises to be established. This policy has supported approximately 25,000 staff into social enterprises, with contracts of roughly £900 million. NHS staff have been assisted by a wide-ranging programme of support from the Department.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Has not the Government's so-called moratorium on the reconfiguration of services put back improvements to urgent care by several years? The Minister inherited perfectly coherent plans for every region in England under the auspices of Lord Darzi's next-stage review. How many lives have been lost and how much money has been wasted by the tearing up of those plans?

Mr Burns: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman is wrong. It is not holding back the national health service; it is moving it forward with things such as the establishment of the 111 service and the reconfiguration proposals, which are based on the four tests that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State introduced in May last year. That not only links reconfiguration to the needs of the local health economy but takes into account the wishes and needs of the local community and medical staff.

Mr Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the improved delivery of urgent care right across the health service is one of the great challenges facing the new commissioning structure and one of the great opportunities to deliver more integrated services that deliver better value and better quality to patients?

Mr Burns: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend; speaking with the authority of the Chair of the Health Committee, he is absolutely right. It is the way forward to drive improvements in service, raise standards and ensure that there is high-class, quality care at an urgent care level and across the acute sector.

Public Health

4. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effects of NHS reorganisation on the protection and improvement of public health. [74850]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Anne Milton): Our reforms put public health at the heart of the new system. The creation of Public Health England, alongside significant new functions and, for the first time, ring-fenced budgets for local authorities, will give public health an unprecedented level of priority. The new local authority role integrates public health with other local authority functions that impact on people's health.

Diana Johnson: Under the previous Government, NHS Hull saw excellent results in improving public health. Under the current Government, Kingston upon Hull's teaching primary care trust has seen a 2.6% cut this year compared with Kingston upon Thames PCT getting a 2% increase—and Hull city council has a 9% cut in its funding as well. What does the Minister think will happen to public health in areas such as Hull with those kinds of cuts?

Anne Milton: I think that public health in areas such as Hull will do exceptionally well. I point out to the hon. Lady that under the previous Government, what happened in practice was that public health budgets were raided constantly and we did not get improvements. If she looks at the figures, she will see that inequalities in health widened.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that despite the previous Government's good intentions on public health, health inequalities have widened, as she has rightly said, obesity rates are going up, smoking among young girls is going up, and alcohol abuse is a serious problem? Does she agree that it is right to deliver services with local authorities and to get into local communities and schools if we want to address these big public health challenges?

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Local authorities have a long and proud tradition of improving the public's health. Public Health England will bring together a fragmented system and strengthen our national response on emergencies and health protection. It will help public health delivery at a local level with proper evidence and leadership.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Contrary to the Minister's statement that the Health and Social Care Bill will put public health at the heart of the health service, 40 directors of public health and 400 public health academics, including Michael Marmot, wrote to *The Daily Telegraph* to say that the Health and Social Care Bill will

> "widen health inequalities; waste much money on attempts to regulate and manage competition; and undermine the ability of the health system to respond…to communicable disease outbreaks",

and that it will

> "disrupt, fragment and weaken the country's public health capabilities."

How can the Minister put her judgment against that of those doctors and experts? Is not the proposal that more than 40 specialist neonatal units may lose staff in the coming year an example of the weakening of public health that is involved in the Bill and the Government's proposals?

Anne Milton: I draw the hon. Lady's attention to the fact that the Health and Social Care Bill proposes for the first time a duty on the Secretary of State to have regard to health inequalities, which, I repeat, widened under the previous Government. I also point out to her that the letter to peers signed by Professor Marmot and others welcomed the emphasis on establishing a closer working relationship between public health and local government. I suggest that the hon. Lady gets out more, because she would hear from public health doctors and local authorities on the ground who welcome these changes.

NHS Hospital Finance

5. **Lorely Burt** (Solihull) (LD): What steps he is taking to reduce the burden on NHS hospitals of (a) PFI repayments and (b) debt. [74851]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): A study conducted by the Treasury has identified savings opportunities of up to 5% on annual payments in NHS PFI schemes. The Cabinet's Efficiency and Reform Group is rolling out a programme of work to secure savings of up to £1.5 billion across the 495 PFI contracts in the public sector in England.

Lorely Burt: Contrary to the earlier complacent comments of the Opposition spokesman, some national health trusts are paying up to 20% of their revenue to PFI contracts. What steps can we take to ensure that the payments are reduced and that the same terrible financial situation never happens again?

Mr Burns: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I, too, recognise the small number of organisations that are reporting financial challenges. The Department is continuing to work with strategic health authorities to ensure that those organisations have robust plans in place for financial recovery, while ensuring the quality of services for patients.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): On the subject of financial pressures on hospitals, does the Minister recall the circular to hospitals from Monitor that was smuggled out on the eve of the royal wedding, which raised the requirement for efficiency cutbacks on hospitals from 4% to 6.5%, which is more than £1 billion in this year alone? Will he admit that the service cutbacks that we are seeing in many hospitals around the country are deeper, as that circular confirms, directly because of the Government's policies?

Mr Burns: No, I do not recognise that, because the figure that the right hon. Gentleman has used is an upper calculation, not an actual figure. I say to him that we are making efficiency savings, and that trusts should be cutting not front-line services but inefficiency, waste and excessive management, and reinvesting every single penny in front-line services.

Treatment Options

6. **Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that patients receive accurate and unbiased information on treatment options. [74852]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Paul Burstow): The NHS constitution gives people a right to information about their treatment options. I want everyone to get timely, trustworthy information such as patient decision aids, so that they are involved in their care decisions. The Health and Social Care Bill will ensure that the commissioning board and clinical commissioning groups secure that.

Helen Jones: In the light of that answer, will the Minister condemn the decision by GPs in Haxby to use NHS data to tout the services of their own private company and give wrong information to patients? Or is that simply a foretaste of what will happen under the Health and Social Care Bill when clinical commissioning groups decide what services are necessary, leaving private companies in which they may have an interest to pick up the slack in a privatised, marketised NHS in which patients come last?

Paul Burstow: The hon. Lady is spreading yet more myths and misconceptions about the reforms that this Government are making. If she had researched the matter more thoroughly, she would know that there is a code of conduct for the promotion of NHS-funded services, which makes it clear that providers of primary medical services cannot directly or indirectly seek or accept from any of their patients payment or other remuneration for any treatment. As a result, the PCT is questioning that clinic about how it has used patient information and will continue to pursue the matter.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that many patients look to NHS Choices for accurate and unbiased information? Is he aware that its site on homeopathy is both biased and inaccurate? As the Department has had a long-standing review that has not reported, will he—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call the Minister.

Paul Burstow: If the hon. Gentleman would care to write to me setting out where he believes there are inaccuracies, we will examine them.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): It is good to be back. I see that in my absence, the Secretary of State has at last made some progress with his plans for a US-style health care system.

I have a letter sent by the practice that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) mentioned a moment ago, in which it wrote that

> "we can no longer offer your procedure as one of our NHS services…I am writing to make you aware of some of the options that you have to have the procedure completed as a private patient."

Helpfully, it enclosed a leaflet announcing the practice's new private minor operations service. Can the Minister point me to any part of the Health and Social Care Bill that will prevent that practice in future?

Paul Burstow: I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman could have pointed me to any such arrangements in current legislation. There is none. However, Dr David Geddes, the medical director of NHS North Yorkshire and York, has stated:

> "We have some concerns about the activities of the Haxby and Wigginton health centre in York and we will be discussing these issues with them directly as a matter of urgency. These concerns are around possible breaches of the Data Protection Act and the accuracy of the information sent to patients. For example, of the eight procedures they list, three are routinely funded by NHS North Yorkshire and York".

Let us be clear that when he was Secretary of State, that PCT was in a worse financial state.

Andy Burnham: That is total bluster, because that vision is precisely what the Government want to do to our NHS. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North said, it is a terrifying glimpse of a Tory NHS in future—not a national health service but a postcode lottery writ large, in which, as we read today, random rationing is taking place around the country. The NHS is in chaos because the Secretary of State made the mistake of combining a £2.5 billion reorganisation, at a time when every ounce of energy should be focused on the NHS front line. This Secretary of State has placed our national health service in the danger zone, and he has lost the confidence of GPs, nurses and midwives. Is it not time that he stopped digging in, listened to NHS staff and dropped this damaging Bill?

Paul Burstow: That was a good example of bluster—perhaps that is what we will see from the Opposition under the right hon. Gentleman's stewardship.

The right hon. Gentleman ought to be aware, because it happened on his watch, that primary care trusts and strategic health authorities have seen their management costs increase by more than £1 billion. There was a 120% increase from 2002 to when this Government took office. That is why we are determined to cut overhead costs in the NHS, so that we can reinvest every penny in the front line.

Heatherwood Hospital, Ascot

7. **Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): What recent representations he has received from Berkshire East primary care trust on the future of Heatherwood hospital in Ascot. [74853]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Andrew Lansley): I have received no such representations.

Adam Afriyie: My constituents are shocked to discover that yet again, the future of Heatherwood is under threat. I have had sight of a major petition, and I am actively campaigning with hard-working local councillors, activists and residents to uncover why Heatherwood's future is under threat when the funding from the Government to the region has increased. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Berkshire East PCT must cut its bureaucracy costs and introduce efficiencies before threatening the money to Heatherwood hospital and other local services?

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and completely understand what he is saying. In this financial year compared to the previous one, revenue available to Berkshire East PCT increased by £16.3 million. That is just one part of the £3.8 billion increase in revenue resources available to the NHS this year compared with last year.

Although I very much welcome the shadow Secretary of State to his new position, we will miss his predecessor. We welcome the new shadow Secretary of State not least because he might begin to explain to the NHS why he thought it was irresponsible to increase resources to the NHS in real terms by about £3.8 billion—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the Secretary of State, but we have a lot to get through. He will resume his seat—and I know he will do so happily.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): One reason for those increases in resources is the growing birth rate in that part of Berkshire. Slough mums who want to use the Ascot birthing centre at Heatherwood have been locked out since the end of September because of a lack of midwives. If the Government had provided the 3,000 midwives they promised, that centre would not be shut. What does the Secretary of State say to that?

Mr Lansley: As the hon. Lady knows, I am very familiar with Heatherwood, because I have two daughters who were born there in the days when it had an obstetrics service, which disappeared under the previous Government. She also knows that I visited Wexham Park in September last year to announce support to the trust in the form of loans, based on commercial principles, totalling £18 million. There is no shortage of midwives under this Government compared with the previous one. Since the election, 522 additional midwives have been recruited, and we are maintaining a record level of midwifery training places.

Decisions made locally are a matter for local commissioners. If they seek to change services, they must meet the four tests that I set out shortly after the election.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): The hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) is absolutely right to raise concerns about the future of Heatherwood hospital, as are Members on both sides of the House who raise such concerns about their hospitals, such as Chase Farm.

The *Health Service Journal* reports that the Department of Health is discussing a hospital closure programme, and yet the Prime Minister has promised to fight bare knuckled against any hospital closures. Will the Secretary of State tell us today categorically—yes or no—whether it is still his policy to have a moratorium on hospital closures? If so, for how long will the moratorium last?

Mr Lansley: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his position. The Government are rebuilding his hospital, so it is slightly ironic that he attacks us on that point.

The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that the Government are pursuing no plan for hospital closures. We are doing precisely what I said we are doing: we are working with hospital trusts across the country to ensure that before they reconfigure their services, they must meet key tests on patient access and choice, local authority support, commissioners' views, and the clinical safety and evidence base. We are working with many of the NHS trusts that the previous Government left in a serious position to ensure that they reach quality and financial sustainability.

Children's Heart Surgery

8. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): When he expects to make a final decision on the safe and sustainable review into children's heart surgery units in England. [74854]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Andrew Lansley): This is a clinically led, independent review, within the NHS. The joint committee of primary care trusts, on behalf of NHS commissioners, will make decisions on the future pattern of children's heart surgery services in England. The review is expected to report before the end of the year.

Andrew Jones: I am sure that the Secretary of State recognises the huge and spirited campaign by local people to retain the children's heart unit at Leeds general infirmary. Will he confirm that option E, which would retain the Leeds unit, will receive full and equal consideration by the joint committee of primary care trusts?

Mr Lansley: The review will develop the recommendations to ensure that children's heart surgery services deliver the very highest standard of care for children and their families. The joint committee of primary care trusts will consider all the relevant evidence before making a decision on the future configuration of children's heart surgery services, and I hope that that will reassure my hon. Friend.

I should emphasise that no aspect of this review is driven by money: it is entirely about how to ensure sustainable high-quality surgery. The issue is in how many and which centres surgical teams should be based in order to maintain that high-quality care.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): There is a deep-rooted belief that this review is biased against the survival of the Leeds unit. Will the Minister therefore please assure the House that the decision will be made purely on the evidence, and not on the basis of any preconceived idea of which units should survive and which should not?

Mr Lansley: It is an independent review and I can assure the hon. Lady that that is indeed the case. It will be based on the evidence. I am sure that she will have heard the response to a debate earlier in the year by the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Mr Burns), who said that while the review has put forward options for consideration, it should not be constrained to consider only those options.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the criteria for the review remain the same; that the rather strange remarks—about more people having voted for one option but more organisations having voted for another—have not affected them; and that those criteria will be used to judge the decision?

Mr Lansley: Happily, I can entirely confirm that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): This review came about as a result of the tragic Bristol heart babies scandal in the 1990s, and it is a measure of the quality of services at Bristol children's hospital that it is now being considered for all four options under the consultation. A few weeks ago, I abseiled down the children's hospital for Wallace & Gromit's Grand Appeal, which is an excellent charity. However, will the Secretary of State assure me that, with the move to fewer and larger specialised units, they will be properly funded and will not rely on MPs throwing themselves off tall buildings?

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. All the representations that we have received in the debates in this House are ample evidence of the high regard and support that Members have for their children's heart surgery services. None of this is about saving money or resources. It is entirely about what delivers the best quality surgical services for children with cardiac problems. To that extent, the intention is that those services—once the decision has been made—are fully funded.

Foreign Nationals (NHS Services)

9. **Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing the number of foreign nationals using NHS services without payment. [74855]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): We have updated and simplified regulations and guidance on identifying and charging visitors who must pay. Immigration rules now before Parliament will allow the UK Borders Agency to refuse entry to visitors with an unpaid debt to the NHS, and we are now reviewing this area more fundamentally to identify further improvements.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the Minister for that answer. On 19 July, I spoke in the House about foreign nationals using the NHS without payment and, having entered a freedom of information request to each foundation trust and PCT, I now have a more accurate picture of the sums involved. It suggests that some £15 million has been completely written off. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the findings and what possible solutions might be found to tackle this important issue?

Mr Burns: I share my hon. Friend's concerns about this important issue and challenge for the NHS. I would be more than happy to see the results of his FOI request, and I or a colleague would also be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): There is a relatively painless way to deal with this. At the time that the visa is applied for, the person should sign an undertaking that they will pay the costs of NHS treatment. Will the Minister talk to the Minister for Immigration to see whether it is possible to introduce such a requirement?

Mr Burns: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. We are looking at a range of options and I am more than happy to pass on his suggestions to my hon. Friend for them to be considered.

Care Sector (Uniforms)

10. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What representations he has received on the need for effective and clear distinction in uniforms worn by fully trained nurses and other workers in the care sector. [74856]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Paul Burstow): The Department receives occasional representations from individuals and groups about uniforms, including the need to distinguish between staff groups. Guidance is available to help employers set sensible policies and, in line with Government policy to reduce central control, we expect decisions on uniforms to be made locally.

Mark Pawsey: There is real concern about the lack of distinction between the uniforms worn by qualified nurses and care workers. The latter are free to wear whatever uniform they like and often give the impression that they are medically qualified. This presents a risk to patients, especially because more and more vulnerable elderly patients are being treated in their homes. Will the Minister look again at this to see what action could be taken to clarify the situation?

Paul Burstow: My hon. Friend has written to me about this matter on behalf of a constituent. The responsibility sits in three places: first, providers have a responsibility to provide clear information to people receiving services from them about who is providing that service; secondly, commissioners have a responsibility for how they contract for those services; and thirdly the Care Quality Commission has a responsibility to regulate those services. Undoubtedly, however, I would be more than happy to look further at the points he makes.

Neuromuscular Services

11. **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What assessment he has of the provision of ventilation machines and related equipment for patients with muscle-wasting diseases who experience respiratory difficulties; and if he will make a statement. [74857]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Paul Burstow): Local health bodies have responsibility for ensuring that adequate provision of health services is made available to those living with neuromuscular conditions. All specialised commissioning groups have now completed their reviews of neuromuscular services, which are a priority in the annual work plans of each of the specialised commissioning groups in 2011-12.

Karl McCartney: I thank the Minister for that answer, but will he also outline the steps being taken to ensure that there is adequate knowledge about neuromuscular conditions among general practitioners and health professionals in Lincoln, so that referrals to the specialist respiratory service in Nottingham can be provided as appropriate?

Paul Burstow: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of ensuring sufficient awareness of the pathways that exist for people to gain access to those services. I understand that the east midlands specialised commissioning group has recently carried out a review of non-invasive ventilation services. I shall ask the group to write to him in more detail.

NHS Service Access

12. **Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): What steps he is taking to assist patients to access a greater range of NHS services. [74859]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): The NHS constitution gives patients the right to make choices about their care. The Government are committed to empowering patients. Our goal is for patients to have more choice of treatment.

Alec Shelbrooke: What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that my constituents requiring cardiac services will have access to the care that they need in Leeds?

Mr Burns: My hon. Friend raises an important and controversial issue, as he will have heard when listening to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State earlier and the debates that he has attended in the House on this subject. We are determined that proper facilities will be made available, based not on money but on the high quality of care, particularly for children. An independent review is being carried out by the joint committee of primary care trusts, which is expected to announce its recommendations later this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has the Minister considered exchanging expertise with the regions of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales? That exchange could take place without any charge.

Mr Burns: The hon. Gentleman raises a valid point. The NHS in England has regular contact and discussions with the NHS in other parts of the United Kingdom, and will continue to do so because both the UK and the devolved authorities can learn a considerable amount from sharing views and practice.

Midwives

13. **Hazel Blears** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of midwives working in the NHS. [74860]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Anne Milton): There were 20,654 full-time equivalents in June 2011—a rise of 522 or 2.6% since May 2010. That is a record.

Hazel Blears: The Minister might know that the midwife-led unit at Salford Royal hospital is due to open in the next few weeks, and I want to put on the record my thanks to the midwives there who carry the heaviest work load in the north-west and are doing a brilliant job. She will not know, however, that last year there were 2,500 extra births in Greater Manchester that were neither expected nor planned for, that there are current vacancies for midwives at St Mary's hospital and that mothers are being pressured to leave hospital sometimes within two or three hours of giving birth. What assurances can she give me that the same standards of safety and quality applying at Salford Royal will be available to Salford families in the future?

Anne Milton: We need to ensure that they are, which is one of the reasons we have asked the Centre for Workforce Intelligence to undertake a pretty in-depth study of the nursing maternity work force during 2011-12. I can reassure the right hon. Lady that the current number of midwifery students entering training is at a record level—more than 2,500—and I join her in paying tribute to our midwives.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): After the recent inquiry into the Furness General hospital maternity unit, will the Minister confirm that she will give full support to midwives across the Morecambe Bay trust area and that the excellent midwife-led unit at Westmorland General hospital in Kendal will be protected?

Anne Milton: I always give my full support to midwives, but we must not forget that this is about teamwork as well. There has been an increase in the number of maternity support workers, who also play a critical role, as do the obstetricians and gynaecologists, all of whom have increased in numbers as well.

Mr Speaker: There is just time for Mr Andrew Rosindell.

Hospital-Acquired Infections

15. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What progress he has made on reducing rates of hospital-acquired infections. [74862]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Andrew Lansley): The NHS is making significant process toward the zero-tolerance approach that we have made it clear it should adopt in respect of all avoidable health care-associated infections. Over the past 12 months MRSA bloodstream infections have fallen by 29% and C. difficile infections have fallen by 17%.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Will he confirm that the Government will continue with the zero-tolerance approach to hospital-acquired infections as the only sure way to resolve and eradicate this problem?

Mr Lansley: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right; indeed, we are extending the range and frequency of the publication of data relating to infections to support the NHS in that work. With his commendable consistency, my hon. Friend asked a question on exactly this subject on 8 March, when he raised the issue of the Barking, Havering and Redbridge trust. I am pleased to be able to report that in the past five months C. difficile infections in the trust have fallen by 57% in comparison with the same five months of 2010, while MRSA bloodstream infections have been reduced by 25%. I expect the trust to continue to bear down on those and other infections in future.

Topical Questions

T1. [74872] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Andrew Lansley): My responsibility is to lead the NHS in delivering improved health outcomes in England; to lead a public health service that improves the health of the nation and reduces health inequalities; and to lead the reform of adult social care which supports and protects vulnerable people.

Kerry McCarthy: In the wake of the former Defence Secretary's resignation and the fact that 40 peers who voted on the Health and Social Care Bill have private sector health interests, and given the Secretary of State's known connections with private health care companies, can he assure the House that he has been as transparent as possible about the influence of private health care companies on the passage of the Bill?

Mr Lansley: I am sorry, but I think the hon. Lady should withdraw that. I have no connection with private health care companies, and if I did, I would have entered it in the register of Members' interests.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who has put the position very explicitly on the record.

T2. [74873] **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): The coalition agreement states:

> "Doctors and nurses need to be able to use their professional judgement about what is right for patients and we will support this by giving front-line staff more control of their working environment."

That being the case, can my right hon. Friend explain why, despite national clinical guidelines, GPs in my constituency face financial penalties if they do not meet targets for reducing the cost of the drugs that they prescribe?

Mr Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I understand that Kent and Medway primary care trust is working to incentivise the optimisation of medicines usage. We provide advice through the National Prescribing Centre and in other ways, and we support that work with GPs through the structure of the quality and outcomes framework. However, this is about incentivisation for best prescribing practice, not about financial penalties.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Many families will be deeply concerned about standards of care for older people in hospitals following the Care Quality Commission's recent report. Patients and the public must be confident that all the necessary steps are being taken immediately to tackle this issue. Months after its initial inspections, will the Minister confirm that the CQC has revisited only six of the 17 hospitals that were failing to ensure that older people had enough food and drink, and if so, can he explain why?

Mr Lansley: Let me make it clear to the hon. Lady, whom I welcome to her new responsibilities, that the reason the Care Quality Commission undertook unannounced nurse-led inspections in hospitals to look at issues of dignity and nutrition was that I asked it to. As an independent regulator, it must make its own decisions about what it does, but I have been clear in my conversations with the Care Quality Commission that it is moving from the tick-box regulatory approach inherited from Labour to one focused on going out there and finding out where there is poor performance. The CQC is shining a light—not least at our request—on poor performance and poor care in the NHS, and it will continue to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that there is intense interest, and therefore there is a premium on brevity from Back and Front Benchers alike.

T4. [74876] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Several of my constituents, including members of the Cure the NHS group, have raised concerns over the way in which "Do not attempt resuscitation" notices are used in hospitals. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what the NHS is doing to ensure that the national guidance is followed?

Mr Lansley: This is an area in which the medical director of the NHS, the General Medical Council and others issue guidance to the NHS. I will gladly write to my hon. Friend setting out the details.

T3. [74875] **Huw Irranca-Davies** (Ogmore) (Lab): I know that I am not alone in being an MP who represents pharmacists who are struggling on a daily basis to access life-saving drugs to treat asthma, diabetes and cancer, even to the point at which some of them are running out of those products. What more can the Secretary of State do to ensure that manufacturers and wholesalers have those life-saving drugs that people's lives depend on? This is not good enough. What more can the Government do?

Mr Lansley: The hon. Gentleman will know that we inherited significant supply problems to pharmacies from the previous Government, not least because of the exchange rate and the possibility of countertrade. We have worked with the industry to resolve those issues. The hon. Gentleman would be well advised to talk to the Welsh Assembly Government about the fact that patients in Wales cannot access the latest cancer medicines, as patients in England can do under the cancer drugs fund.

T6. [74878] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Today is anti-slavery day, and our excellent Prime Minister will be hosting a reception at Downing street tomorrow to promote the new Government anti-trafficking strategy. That strategy includes a requirement for the health service to be proactive in identifying victims of trafficking. What progress has been made on that?

Mr Lansley: I am sure that we all share my hon. Friend's view of the great importance of this matter. The Department of Health leads on ensuring that health care is available to people who have been rescued by the police from human trafficking. We also lead on promoting an awareness that local government has multi-agency safeguarding processes to assist in supporting people who have been abused and harmed. There is more to say, but I will write to my hon. Friend on the subject.

T5. [74877] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): In the evidence session on the Health and Social Care Bill, the Secretary of State told me that he was committed to reducing health inequalities. We also heard from the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) on that subject a few moments ago. Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore explain why he made a political decision last December, against the advice of the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation, to reduce the health inequalities component of primary care trusts' target funding from 15% to 20%, in effect shifting funding from poor health areas such as my constituency to richer health areas such as his own? The Government are saying one thing—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have got the question.

Mr Lansley: I made no decision contrary to the advice of the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. If the hon. Lady cares to look at the increase in revenue allocations to primary care trusts across the country, she will see that many of the lowest allocations are in richer areas and the highest are in the most needy areas.

T8. [74880] **Mr Rob Wilson** (Reading East) (Con): Last week, a survey found that 80% of people want more choice in how and where they are treated. Does that not show that the Government are absolutely right to press on with modernising the NHS?

Mr Lansley: Yes, it was absolutely clear that the public wanted choice of treatment. That is one of the reasons that we have published some of the patient decision aids for the first time, and we will continue to do more. People want a choice in the consultant-led team that will provide their treatment, and in the hospital where that will happen. In the past few weeks, we have set out the details of how we are going to give patients the choice that they seek.

T7. [74879] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I have noticed a growing creeping privatisation of cleaning contracts in the NHS this year. Does this signify a return to the old Tory days of longer waiting lists and dirty hospitals?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): The hon. Gentleman seems to be somewhat confused. This is not about privatisation in a derogatory sense, as he is trying to suggest. For many years, including the 13 years of the Labour Government, hospital cleaning services in NHS hospitals were put out to tender, and many private companies provided the service. That is simply continuing.

T9. [74881] **Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): I am a long-standing supporter of independent sector treatment centres and of the need for commissioners to be able to bring in private and voluntary sector providers, as well as alternative NHS provision where existing services fail to improve—*[Interruption.]* I see that some Labour Members, including the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), disagree, but does at least the Secretary of State agree—

Mr Speaker: We are grateful.

Mr Lansley: I will not interrupt the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) who is replying from a sedentary position. I agree with my hon. Friend. What we heard under the Labour Government appears to be very much at odds and not at all in keeping with what we hear from the Labour Opposition now. Let me remind my hon. Friend that the South Gloucestershire primary care trust has received a cash increase of £10 million, or 3%, this year. Like every other part of England, it is receiving increases in resources this year that the shadow Health Secretary opposed.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask the Secretary of State to look back at issues of public health? What is he doing to provide leadership in this sector, especially when we talk to people at the top of the health service who say that there are real problems with obesity in nurses and smoking among doctors? Where is the leadership coming on those issues?

Mr Lansley: Let me just give the hon. Gentleman one or two examples. In the last few days, we have published an obesity call to action, which sets out national ambitions to reduce calorie consumption to a point where people can maintain a healthy weight or reduce their weight. We have set out a tobacco control plan, which is regarded as a leader across the world. About three weeks ago, I attended the United Nations General Assembly in order to join in debates with colleagues on reducing the tide of non-communicable diseases across the world. There is also the work of Sir Michael Marmot, which we share with him; he knows that we are taking it forward nationally and internationally to tackle the wider social determinants of health. That is why we have put local government leadership on health improvement at the heart of the Health and Social Care Bill.

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): Mr Paul Eccles is a constituent of mine. He is a qualified care assistant who wants to go freelance and set up his own business, helping people in their own homes. However, the annual up-front £1,000 charge of the Care Quality Commission is preventing him from starting this new venture. Will the Secretary of State meet me so we can find a way to help my constituent get his business off the ground?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Paul Burstow): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight how well-intended regulation can sometimes be a way of blocking effective growth and the opportunities available for new people to set up businesses in the care sector. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that matter.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): Stockport is one of only five PCTs in the country that does not provide any in vitro fertilisation treatment—in spite of recommendations from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. Does the Secretary of State think it fair that my constituents, who pay the same taxes as everybody else, do not get the same access to this treatment as people living elsewhere?

Mr Lansley: The hon. Lady will know, I hope, that the deputy chief executive wrote to primary care trusts a few weeks ago further to remind them of the need to respond to NICE clinical guidelines. It was the hon. Lady's Secretary of State, John Reid who, when NICE published its guidelines, told PCTs in 2004 that they should not follow them.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The news that the Woodhaven hospital in my constituency is threatened with closure only eight years after it was opened as a state-of-the-art mental health facility is causing great concern. Will my right hon. Friend endeavour to look into what is proposed for the closure of acute in-patient beds because the "hospital at home" alternative is simply not good enough?

Paul Burstow: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question and I would certainly be happy to look further into the matter and write to him accordingly.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester Central) (Lab): When the Minister responsible for care services wrote to me about the closure of the Edale unit in Manchester, why did he not address the issue that the closure would cost more money than it saved or the fact that the police had expressed concerns about their access in emergency times, particularly during the weekend?

Paul Burstow: I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman feels that all the issues have not been dealt with following our telephone conversation and subsequent correspondence. I will check the correspondence again, and if I find that something is missing, I will certainly provide an answer.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the policy review of the entitlement of foreign nationals to free NHS care, but will my right hon. Friend assure the House that it will examine the options relating to charges for GP as well as hospital services?

Mr Burns: My hon. Friend has asked an extremely reasonable question, and I can give him the assurance that he seeks.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): PCTs in Staffordshire are pre-empting legislation by merging and reorganising now, which has led to plans to close the high street practice in Newcastle-under-Lyme simply because it is run by salaried GPs. Is that really NHS policy? If not, what will the Secretary of State do to help 5,000 patients rescue a much-needed surgery?

Mr Lansley: Nothing that is being done pre-empts legislation. What is being done in relation to primary care trust clusters is being done under existing legislation, and was necessary not least to enable us to achieve a reduction of £329 million in management costs in the first year following the election. In contrast, there was a £350 million increase in the year before the election under the hon. Gentleman's right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham).

I do not know the circumstances of the centre to which the hon. Gentleman referred because the decision will have been made locally and will not have involved me, but I will gladly write to him about it.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): The full roll-out of 111 services is now proceeding. Is the Secretary of State satisfied that imploding PCTs can get the procurement right in the time allowed?

Mr Lansley: I am confident that we will make the progress that we seek. If we are not ready in any location, we will not be able to proceed with that procurement, but the PCTs will act on the basis of an evaluation of four pilots. To that extent, the character of what they are procuring through the 111 system will be well defined through piloting.

Mr Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): What progress has been made since the launch of the Secretary of State's tobacco control plan last March in changing the behaviour of people who smoke in cars in the presence of children?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Anne Milton): The right hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest in this subject. We are working on a number of areas, but I think that the extension of public health duties to local authorities will open up many opportunities to persuade parents to think carefully about where they smoke, whether it is in cars or in their own homes.

Mr David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): There is real concern throughout the country about the health inequalities left by the last Government. Will the Minister confirm that funding for areas with relatively large health inequalities will not be raided, as it has been in the past under Labour?

Anne Milton: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, the Health and Social Care Bill proposes the introduction of the first ever legal duty for the Secretary of State to have regard to the reduction of health inequalities. That covers both NHS and public health functions. We are also addressing the health needs of some of the most vulnerable people through the "Inclusion Health" programme.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the officers of 12 all-party groups associated with care have urged the Government to commit themselves to the urgent reform recommended by Dilnot. Will the Minister update the House on the Government's response to the Dilnot recommendations, and tell us when the cross-party talks will begin?

Paul Burstow: I know that the hon. Lady follows these issues closely. In September we published a plan for consultation on the proposals, which includes looking beyond the Dilnot commission's recommendations at issues of quality, regulation, and many other aspects of how we can secure a comprehensive reform of social care. Today my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to Opposition Front Benchers with the aim of resuming the discussions across parties to ensure that we get the conversation going with the new Opposition Front-Bench team as soon as possible.

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): In a recent ministerial response, I was informed that public health services were a matter for the local NHS and that it would not be appropriate for Ministers to become involved or intervene. The transfer of staff from PCTs to local authorities excludes staff delivering services relating to weight management, smoking cessation, physical activity promotion, sexual health, community development and diabetes awareness-raising. How on earth can local authorities pick up the responsibilities without being given the staff who would enable them to do it?

Anne Milton: The transition period is critical, and there is no suggestion that local authorities will not have all the tools in the box to enable them not only reduce to health inequalities, but to improve the public's health. As we have stated many times, it is absolutely dreadful that under the last Government health inequalities increased rather than decreased.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. As usual, demand has exceeded supply, and we must now move on.

Afghanistan

3.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Philip Hammond): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on Afghanistan.

Let me begin by paying tribute to Rifleman Vijay Rai of the 2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles, who died in Afghanistan on Saturday. His commanding officer described him as tough, loyal, utterly professional and immensely proud to have been serving in the British Army. I am sure I speak for the whole House in saying that our thoughts are with his family at this difficult time.

The House will appreciate that I have not yet had an opportunity to visit our troops in Afghanistan. I intend to do so as soon as is practical. The purpose of this statement is to provide information on progress in Afghanistan since the Prime Minister's statement to the House on 6 July. Our mission is to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for international terrorism, and the presence of our armed forces in Afghanistan to achieve this aim is supported on all sides of the House.

This mission has a cost: 383 members of our armed forces have lost their lives since operations began—eight since the Prime Minister's statement of 6 July. I know the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute both to their sacrifice and to all those who have returned with serious injuries, and to the families who support them. I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the troops from Estonia, Denmark and Tonga who are operating under British command in central Helmand. Since 6 July, two Danish soldiers and one Estonian soldier have also lost their lives, and I am sure the House will want to join me in expressing condolences to their families.

I am clear that this is an operation to protect our national security and national interests. That view is shared by the 49-nation, UN-mandated coalition. We share a common purpose: to enhance security and build the capacity of the Afghan national security forces and the Afghan Government, so that Afghans themselves can be responsible for their own territory, their own security and their own affairs. We ensure our national security and the security of the NATO alliance by helping the Afghans to take control of theirs.

Our strategy is comprehensive, drawing security, governance and development objectives together. In 10 years, with international support and assistance, Afghanistan has come a long way. Governance and the rule of law are improving across the country. The Afghan Government are providing increasing levels of basic services, with Afghans enjoying much greater access to health facilities, and more education opportunities—including for girls—than in 2001. We welcome the Afghan Parliament's decision on Saturday to approve the supplementary budget to recapitalise the central bank, paving the way towards agreement on a new International Monetary Fund programme of support in the coming weeks. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has been actively engaged with the Afghan Ministry of Finance and the IMF in support of this objective. Agreeing the new programme will reinvigorate the Kabul process, allowing donors to align themselves behind Afghan Government priorities and systems as we move through transition and beyond.

Let us not understate the tangible improvements that have taken place, but let us also not underestimate the scale of the remaining challenge. We are working from a very low base. If progress is to be sustained, the commitment of the international community, including the UK, will have to endure for many years to come, long after international troops have withdrawn from combat operations.

On the security front, progress has been real and meaningful, but it has been hard won and is not irreversible. In many areas, Afghanistan remains a dangerous place. Levels of violence vary dramatically from region to region, but the insurgency continues to be a nationwide threat. The insurgency is under considerable pressure, but its leaders remain committed to conducting a violent campaign. Over recent months we have seen them increasingly focus on high-profile attacks, such as that on the British Council in August and on the US embassy and the international security assistance force headquarters in September. The murder of former President Rabbani is a particular setback. It is important that his death does not derail efforts to engage with those willing to renounce violence and work towards peace. We will continue to support President Karzai's efforts to promote peace and reconciliation, and are encouraging engagement to support this from all those in the region, including Pakistan.

Despite that difficult background, there is also cause for optimism. In the UK area of operations in central Helmand, there is clear evidence that the ISAF troop surge has brought security gains, limiting the insurgents' ability to prosecute their campaign. UK troops, partnered with Afghan security forces, are having a tangible impact on insurgent activity in our area of operations. On 9 October, 20 Armoured Brigade assumed authority for Task Force Helmand from 3 Commando Brigade, who can be proud of the progress made during their tour.

The central achievement this summer has been the commencement of the formal security transition process. July saw the first group of three provinces and four urban areas across Afghanistan, covering almost a quarter of the population, begin that process. This included Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, where the Afghan national police now lead on security in this bustling community of 120,000 people. ISAF remains ready to provide support if needed, but the ANSF have been able to respond effectively to insurgent attacks and to pre-empt many. That has been a source of considerable pride, both to the Afghan security forces and to the civilian population. Here in the UK, we should remember that the ANSF have suffered very considerable losses themselves.

The process of transition is on track and will continue. The Afghan Government, with ISAF support, are continuing the preparatory work needed to begin the transition process in the next set of provinces and districts. October also saw Task Force Helmand resume responsibility for the upper Gereshk valley. That follows the temporary deployment of US marine corps to the area, during which time UK forces provided security on the strategically significant Highway 1, outside the UK area of operations. UK forces will now work with the ANSF to prepare the district to enter the transition process in the future. We look forward to the second tranche of transition and an announcement later in the autumn by President Karzai outlining which areas are to be included.

Strong Afghan national security forces are key to achieving our objectives. The ANA now stands at 169,000 men and the ANP stands at 134,000, and both are on track to meet their target levels by October 2012. But progress cannot be measured in quantity alone—it must be measured in quality too—in respect of the effectiveness of the Afghan forces and the strength of their organisation. The Afghan-led response to the attacks on the US embassy and ISAF headquarters saw the ANSF successfully complete an exceptionally difficult night-time building clearance and, for the first time, Afghan air force helicopters were deployed in direct support of troops on the ground. Operational effectiveness rates are improving, allowing the ANSF to take the lead in many operations. Literacy rates among the ANSF are also improving. All 12 of the Afghan army's planned specialist branches are now functioning, which will, in time, improve self-sufficiency and professionalism. Measures to improve retention rates in the ANSF have also been introduced. Such measures include a pension scheme and a work cycle consisting of periods of operations, training and leave. So the ANSF are improving but, as the recent report by UNAMA, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, shows, there remain important areas where further improvement is crucial.

President Karzai has stated his commitment to his Government assuming lead security responsibility across the country as a whole by the end of 2014, which is a goal that we share and support. That means that British troops will not be in a combat role by 2015, nor will they be deployed in the numbers they are now. The ANSF will, however, still need support from the international community even after the conclusion of the transition process. We will continue to support their development: for instance, through our lead involvement in a new officers academy announced by the Prime Minister in the summer.

On 5 December, the Afghan Government will chair an international conference in Bonn. This is a key opportunity to advance the political track. The Istanbul conference in November and the Chicago summit next May are further opportunities for the international community to reiterate its long-term commitment to Afghanistan. That commitment is crucial if we are to deliver on our key objective of ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for international terrorism. Our armed forces will continue to protect our national interests with the selfless devotion to duty we have come to expect. I am sure that we in this House will reciprocate by maintaining the staunch cross-party support that has underpinned the operation from the outset, and I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Jim Murphy (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I echo the tribute paid to Rifleman Vijay Rai of 2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles, who died in action on Saturday. On all such occasions it is right that we should recognise the sacrifice and dedication of our service personnel here at home and overseas. They fight for others' security and peace in order to protect our own. They carry our pride and our patriotism and they, and their families, must be the constant in our minds. It is also right that we should pay tribute to our allies, many of them nations that have also been scarred by terrorism.

I welcome the new Secretary of State and thank him in advance for his statement. I want to put on record my personal view that, whatever other disagreements I had with the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), I never doubted his passion about doing the right thing in Afghanistan, his personal commitment to supporting our forces, and the skill that he showed in trying to build consensus on the operations in Libya. As I made clear to him, when the Government do the right thing we will strongly support them, while carefully scrutinising their decisions. Will the Secretary of State take this early opportunity to reiterate his predecessor's welcome commitment that nothing in the strategic defence and security review will adversely impact on the Afghan front line, and will he say whether anyone currently serving in Afghanistan is in line for compulsory redundancy?

Media attention has understandably been on Libya in recent months, but it has been another difficult summer in Afghanistan. Despite the painful losses, British casualties have mercifully been significantly lower than in the last two years, and casualties among all international forces lower than last year. There are, however, worrying security trends, with high-profile terrorist attacks including that against the British Council, which reminded us again of the danger in which many of our people, including civilians, put themselves for the sake of stability in Afghanistan and security at home. There have also been increased targeted assassinations across the country, and signs of insurgency spreading to previously calmer areas, and mixed messages on the political track. Despite that, our forces are doing brilliant work in central Helmand, jointly with the Afghan army and police force. This remains an intense and challenging campaign and one that is in our national interest. I hope the new Secretary of State will consistently make the case for why our forces are engaged in Afghanistan.

Let me turn now to my specific questions. We continue to support the intention to end the British combat role in Afghanistan by 2014. Will the Secretary of State share his assessment of the security situation and how it has changed in the districts and provinces involved in the first phase of transition? Will he assure the House that detailed plans for troop withdrawal will always be based on military advice and conditions on the ground?

On security, last week I spent time at NATO HQ and met the Secretary-General of NATO, who was full of praise for our forces. We discussed the security situation in Afghanistan. Will the Secretary of State comment on reports that Pakistani militants are exploiting a security vacuum left by the departure of US troops from parts of eastern Afghanistan, notably Kunar and Nuristan?

This is an issue for the whole of NATO, so how does the Secretary of State think we can persuade other nations with forces in Afghanistan to bear more of the burden? Pakistan is, of course, central to the future of Afghanistan and the wider region, so could he reflect on the worrying assessment by Admiral Mike Mullen that Pakistani intelligence is currently supporting extremists in Afghanistan? The campaign of targeted assassinations has also suggested a pattern of infiltration by the Taliban into Afghan forces. Could he say what changes are being made to Afghan national army and Afghan national police recruitment procedures and effective background checks to protect against this in future?

On the political process, we all know that for progress to be made in Afghanistan, there must be inclusive politics inside and beyond the country's borders. Within its borders, could the Secretary of State reinforce the importance of protecting the gains made in development

[Mr Jim Murphy]

in Afghanistan in reducing child mortality and improving education? There are more than 7 million students in schools across the country, one third of whom are now girls. Beyond Afghanistan's borders, India has recently signed a strategic partnership with Afghanistan. What does he see its significance as being, and what does he read into Pakistan's response? The forthcoming Bonn conference, as he suggested, can be a real moment of strategic progress. Will he share his assessment of the credible likely outcomes coming from the Bonn conference?

In conclusion, we need Afghan security forces that are strong enough to defend and sustain the political and economic progress, and a constitution that reflects a changed Afghanistan, but to do so we need genuine and deeper achievements on economic development, political reconciliation, and better involvement with neighbours. Britain fought three wars in 80 years in Afghanistan; this is our fourth, and we have no intention of there being a fifth. That is why it is essential that real progress be made at the forthcoming Bonn conference.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome, and indeed for his continuing endorsement of the cross-party approach to this issue. He asked about the impact of the SDSR on the Afghan front line and I can tell him that in the very short time that I have had at the MOD, one of the first things I have done is to ask for an assessment of the equipment and personal protection available to our troops in Afghanistan. I am satisfied that they have the best level of protection they have had since this campaign began and appropriate equipment to carry out the task that they are being asked to carry out, and I will ensure that that remains my No. 1 priority. He asked about compulsory redundancies. No troops serving in Afghanistan will be subject to compulsory procedures either while they are serving in Afghanistan or during their recovery period upon return.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the importance of the political track, and I absolutely agree with him. If Afghanistan is to have a stable and sustainable future, there has to be an inclusive solution to the political challenges that the country faces. I recognise that there are huge issues in achieving that but it must remain our focus. He was also right to draw attention to the success of our forces. A military solution alone will not be sufficient, but without a climate of security we will not be able to achieve the nation-building and reconciliation process that is so important for the future. I confirm that I will consistently make the case for the presence of our troops in Afghanistan.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the current security situation. In the districts and provinces that have transitioned, the experience is good and the Afghan national security forces are showing good capability. Indeed, ISAF in Lashkar Gah has had to intervene only once since the transition took place.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about Pakistani militants, and I think he was referring to Haqqani network activity in the more easterly provinces to the east of where Task Force Helmand is operational. There has certainly been an increase in activity and the pattern clearly is that there has been a reduction in military activity in Regional Command South West but a corresponding increase in some other areas, including the area subject to Haqqani network influence.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about the centrality—the crucial involvement—of Pakistan in the long-term solution to the problem. We should never forget that Pakistan has borne a burden as great as that of any other country in the fight against terrorism, taking more civilian casualties than any other nation. We will continue to work with the Pakistanis to ensure that they engage in the interests of Afghan security, and indeed of their own long-term security, by ensuring that the insurgency is defeated.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about the infiltration of the ANSF through recruits. I absolutely accept that this is a critical issue. I have been assured that progress is being made, but I do not have the details that I can give to him across the Dispatch Box. I am very happy to write to him later today.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked about protecting development gains. We are clear that a long-term lasting solution must involve the securing of those development gains and building on them—enhancing them. Afghanistan has to become a viable nation capable of offering its citizens basic services that they require, and capable, in a sense, of competing in its offer with what Taliban and other insurgents have been offering at local level. We have to build on those processes. We have to secure the gains that have been made, and I hope that at the Bonn conference the international community will take the opportunity to send a very clear signal of its long-term commitment to this process, beyond the draw-down of forces at the end of 2014.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his vitally important post and wish him every success in it, but may I commiserate with him, as I have with his six predecessors, on bearing responsibility for what, despite the tremendous bravery of our troops, I have always predicted since 2002, future historians will regard as a fiasco as great as the first two Anglo-Afghan wars? The wisest thing the Secretary of State for Defence can now do is to bring our troops home as soon as possible.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his views. I am sure other Members of the House are familiar with them. That is not the view that the Government take. The Government take the view that we are embarked on a process. The Afghanisation of security is progressing. We have set out a timetable for the draw-down of forces, and we will continue to engage actively with the processes of nation-building, reconciliation and Afghanisation of security over that timetable.

Mr Bob Ainsworth (Coventry North East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. Is he yet able to say anything to the House about the Government's policy on the need for co-ordination across the whole of ISAF of the draw-down of troops between now and 2014 towards the end of the combat mission? I am concerned. We are already backfilling in the upper Gereshk valley and we are operating out of area, as he said, on Highway 1. If we take that too far, we will damage the troop density that has given our troops the ability to make the operational progress that they have made. The Secretary of State needs to watch this. Our troops are enthusiastic to help. They see a job that needs to be done and they want to go and do it. If he allows that to go too far, it will damage their ability to operate.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and thank him for his welcome. Some points of information: the operation on Highway 1 has concluded, so we are no longer operating out of area on Highway 1. We are not backfilling in the upper Gereshk valley. The upper Gereshk valley is part of the UK area of operations. The US marine corps moved into the area in order to protect contractors carrying out a blacktopping of the strategically important Highway 611. That is now complete, and we have retaken control of it.

On the crucial issue of draw-down, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We cannot talk about the profile of UK draw-down to the end of 2014 and beyond in isolation. We have to look at what the United States is doing, and we will obviously have careful regard to the announcements of US intentions and take the advice of the military in responding to those.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): May I, too, offer my congratulations to my right hon. Friend? Is he aware of some suggestions that there has been an adverse impact on the availability of certain equipment in Afghanistan because of deployments over Libya? That may have been necessary and even acceptable in the short term, but may we take it that at the earliest date any such equipment—I particularly have in mind Apache helicopters—will be made available for deployment in Afghanistan?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend, who will know that the news from Libya appears to be progressing, and that progress is being made towards liberation. I hope that we will very quickly be at the point where equipment tied up in the Libya campaign can be released.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position, thank him for advance sight of his statement, and join in his message of condolence. Earlier today a survey of Afghan opinion was published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and it found that 56% of Afghans now see the foreign troop contingent as an occupying force, and only 39% see ISAF as a guarantee of security—down from the 45% who did so only last year. Does the Secretary of State have any reason to disbelieve those pessimistic findings?

Mr Hammond: The important thing is that the ANSF are growing in size and capability, so, with 25% of the population already living in areas that have been transitioned and another tranche of transition to be announced later this autumn, Afghan civilians will increasingly find that their day-to-day security contacts are with the Afghan national security forces. As we move towards 2014, allowing foreign forces to be seen as formations that can be withdrawn without compromising the security that Afghan civilians enjoy is a positive step, so I should like to see something positive in the figures that the hon. Gentleman cites.

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): I, too, welcome my right hon. Friend to his position. He has a hard act to follow, but I am sure that he will do a very fine job—and if he does not, the Defence Committee will hold him to account. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of our key strategic aims in Afghanistan must be to bolster the stability of Pakistan? How does he think that we can manage the draw-down of our combat troops so as to bolster that stability, rather than undermine it?

Mr Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend, and absolutely agree with his analysis that the greatest strategic challenge is security in the wider region, including security in the vulnerable cross-border area. If he does not mind, with only 48 hours under my belt, I will not give the House a lecture on how that is to be delivered, but I will confirm that I recognise it as a very important priority.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to the formidable challenges that lie ahead of him. Can he assure the House that if the security situation in Afghanistan were to deteriorate after 2014, there would be sufficient flexibility to deploy British military assets in support of the Afghan security services?

Mr Hammond: The Prime Minister has made it very clear that we will have withdrawn from a combat role by the end of 2014, and that the number of UK troops remaining after that point will be very considerably fewer than are there now. The detail of the role of those few remaining troops has yet to be determined.

Richard Ottaway (Croydon South) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State to his office? He rightly says that our mission is to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for international terrorism. When he does get out to Afghanistan, will he reflect on the possibility that, with the death of Osama bin Laden and other leading terrorists, that mission might already have been achieved? If he reaches that conclusion, will he agree that it gives him some flexibility over the rate of the draw-down?

Mr Hammond: I am sorry to say to my hon. Friend that I think that that is a slightly optimistic assessment. I do not need to get to Afghanistan to make that assessment. We know from history that areas that are subject to divided—weak—Government and poor security are likely to become safe havens for international terrorism. It is very much in our own national interests that we support the Afghan national Government to be a strong, unifying and inclusive force and secure the development gains that have been made, as well as the Afghanisation of the security process. That will be the Government's agenda.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): 2014 also happens to be the end of the second term of President Karzai, who has led us to believe that he will not seek reappointment—which would also be unconstitutional. That means that at the very time when we are withdrawing troops, we require political stability. Can the Secretary of State give us some indication of his thinking on how that political stability in Afghanistan can be provided?

Mr Hammond: The draw-down of troops will take place between 2012 and 2014, and the profile of that draw-down has not yet been decided or confirmed.

[Mr Philip Hammond]

At the same time, the Afghan national security forces will be taking an ever greater role in maintaining security in the country. I would like to think that by that stage the political process will be able to go on in a constitutional fashion, while the Afghan national security forces protect the security of the country and the population and create the stable baseline that will allow for that political process.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his kind and sincere words about my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). I also express my faith in my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State; I am sure that he will fulfil our expectations that he will do a good job in his new role. Is he concerned that President Karzai has, once again, ruled out any dialogue with the Taliban when it is quite obvious that any stable political settlement in Kabul is essential if security is to be maintained as we withdraw from Afghanistan?

Mr Hammond: It is clear that politicians in Kabul will have to respond to the assault on the peace process that the assassination of former President Rabbani represents. However, it is also clear that in the long run there is no alternative to an inclusive peace process that will bring all elements of the Afghan population into a durable and sustainable settlement.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): One thing that we are all united on is the sheer bravery of the British troops in Afghanistan; there is no division on that. Is it not important, however, for the new Defence Minister to realise that there is not unanimous support for a 10-year-old war that many of us consider to be absolutely unwinnable, and that it is certainly the strong feeling in the country—there is no doubt about it—that the sooner that British troops come home, the better it will be?

Mr Hammond: If I have got it wrong I will correct myself, but I am pretty sure that I said "cross-party" support, and resisted the temptation to say that there was support in all parts of the House.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Public recognition of service and sacrifice in Afghanistan is terribly important. The good people of Royal Wootton Bassett were delighted to welcome the new Secretary of State and the Prime Minister there on Sunday. Will my right hon. Friend similarly try to find time in his diary to be at the north door of Westminster Hall on 31 October at 3.30 in the afternoon to welcome in 3 Commando Brigade as they return from Afghanistan?

Mr Hammond: That was in the diary of my predecessor, and it remains in my own diary.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Instead of detonating improvised explosive devices safely at a distance, we still instruct our soldiers to dismantle them by hand in order to identify—to find the fingerprints of—the bomb makers, and then imprison them. After the escape of 500 Taliban prisoners from Kandahar, including many bombers, is it reasonable to ask our troops to continue to dismantle those bombs in such a dangerous way when we cannot keep the prisoners safely behind bars?

Mr Hammond: There are two parts to the hon. Gentleman's question. First, we clearly have to work with the Afghans to improve detention arrangements in Afghanistan in terms of ensuring that human rights issues are properly respected and that prisons are secure. On the first part of his question regarding the technical process used for dealing with IEDs, I am afraid that I have not got to that part of my briefing pack yet, but now that he has drawn my attention to it I will ask the relevant questions this afternoon, and will be happy to write to him.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is highly probable that when our troops withdraw in 2014, the insurgency will still be active. Among its top targets will be any civilians whom we leave behind to engage in nation building, and any Afghan interpreters who have helped our forces. When he has the time and opportunity, will the Secretary of State give serious thought to how those two groups are to be protected?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is, of course, right. The plan for post-2014 has to include a credible way of protecting UK civilians involved in reconstruction and development, and a solution for those who have served the British forces and who might be at risk as a result.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): I hope that the Secretary of State will find time in the near future to read the Defence Committee's report, "Operations in Afghanistan". Will he say more about what assessment the Government have made of the role of women in the future of Afghanistan?

Mr Hammond: The Select Committee's report is in my box and I was hoping to have read it before today, but alas! I will certainly put it high on my reading list. It is clear that a sustainable future for Afghanistan has to include all parts of the population. We have to build on the enormous gains that have been made, particularly in the education of girls. That is already beginning to flow through into changing the nature of Afghan society. We must build on those gains, and we are clear that they are part of the sustainable future that we crave.

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): May I join other colleagues in welcoming my right hon. Friend to his post? May I press him on the implications of the Indian-Afghan strategic partnership? He rightly talks about the need for an inclusive political process internally. Externally from Afghanistan, that must include China, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, as well as India.

Mr Hammond: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that all Afghanistan's neighbours are engaged in the process and that none of them should feel threatened by it.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): To follow on from the excellent question asked by the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, if the Government are to meet their deadline of coming out by 2014—in other words, if we assume that the insurgency will be well under control and that the Afghan national army and police can deal with it—it will be crucial for the Pakistani security services to be in a much better position in terms of the co-operation that they give than they are now.

I know that the Secretary of State has been in the job only a short time and that he may want to write to me, but can he give an assessment of whether the situation of the Pakistani security services helping the Taliban and other extremists has got better or worse in the past six months?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman will, I hope, forgive me if I say that from what I have seen so far, this is an incredibly complex and sensitive area. I would rather study it a little further before writing to him, if he does not mind.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. He inherits a well-intentioned campaign, but if we are honest, there has been a drift in mission and a lack of clarity and conviction from the international community. If we are honest, there is not the required sense of governance at a regional or a national level, which means that a lot of the good work that we are doing in Helmand may well be reversible. I ask him to examine the provinces of Kunar and Nuristan, which were handed over to the Afghan forces but are, sadly, now in the hands of the Taliban.

Mr Hammond: I will certainly look at those provinces and draw the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to what my hon. Friend has said. Of course, my focus will be on the area of central Helmand, for which the British forces have direct responsibility.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I welcome the Secretary of State to his new position and pay tribute to the professionalism of his colleague who served before him. Will the Secretary of State assure me, and the House, that soldiers who have returned home from Afghanistan with serious physical and mental injuries will continue to receive the best possible medical attention for as long as they need it?

Mr Hammond: The Government have put a huge investment of time, management effort and money into that exercise, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that those who need medical help as a result of injuries that they received while fighting on behalf of their country will receive it.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The battalion that I commanded, 1st Mercians, will shortly return to Afghanistan, within two years. When it was there last it lost 12 men and more than 100 were wounded. May I ask the Secretary of State to write to me, when he can, to explain how battle casualty replacements will work in the future? Commanding officers find it very difficult if they lose 100 men out of 500, and it will be especially difficult as we will be withdrawing and drawing down in the next couple of years.

Mr Hammond: I am happy to write to my hon. Friend, who of course has direct experience of handling such issues. The good news, of course, is that casualty figures are substantially down. UK forces are taking far fewer casualties than they were at the time to which he refers. However, I will write to him.

Mr Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is the seventh Secretary of State since the conflict started, and we all wish him well. The statements, though, have not changed, even if Secretaries of State have come and gone. We hear about cautious optimism, determinism, determination and some interesting development statistics, then the next Secretary of State comes along and repeats the same statements. May I urge him to be the first one to grab hold of strategy and tactics from our 250-odd generals and ensure that whatever presence we maintain in Afghanistan, there are no more funeral cavalcades through Royal Wootton Bassett? Our men should stop being Taliban target practice.

Mr Hammond: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He may detect a similarity in the statements, and I may detect a similarity in his questions. I can tell him that there has been very significant military progress in the taskforce Helmand area. Violent incidents and casualties are down dramatically this summer fighting season compared with last.

Mr MacShane *indicated dissent.*

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman may shake his head, but the fact is that the number of enemy-initiated violent incidents this summer fighting season is 40% down on the number last summer fighting season. In parallel with that, governance is improving. Governor Mangal, in Helmand province, is behind an effective programme of poppy eradication that has reduced the poppy crop year on year. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman says something unrepeatable, but I say to him that tackling the root causes of the problem at the level of the Afghan economy, basic public services and security is the way to create a stable situation in the future, and we will persist with it.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his assumption of his extremely challenging post. Despite the title of the statement, the questions asked today have revealed that the problem lies as much in Pakistan as in Afghanistan. Will the Secretary of State tell the House when he is likely to engage in talks with his Pakistani counterpart?

Mr Hammond: Of course the Foreign Secretary leads on our relationships with Pakistan, but I am absolutely ready and willing to engage with my military counterparts in Pakistan if he wishes me to do so.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Secretary of State has emphasised military transition, political inclusion and stabilisation. Is he sensitive to the concerns in Afghan civil society that the imperatives for the international community, and the interests of Afghan political powers in the context of those imperatives, may not extend to sustaining the advances that there have been in the status of women? As well as insisting that Afghanistan must never again be a safe haven for terrorists, will he outline the Government's determination that it will never again be a theme park for atavistic prejudice against women?

Mr Hammond: I think that some of the gains already made, such as the education of girls, will be irreversible changes in Afghan society. We have made it very clear

[James Morris]

consumers unless we are clear about dealing with the diversity of our energy supply and the problems of energy security. Those factors are critical to the debate.

Other hon. Members have mentioned tariff complexity. This brings us back to the responsibilities of the big six energy companies. The market is too complicated. There are too many tariffs and it is confusing for consumers. I agree with the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne that those who suffer most from this tariff complexity are the most vulnerable of our residents.

Laura Sandys: May I add that it is not only the most vulnerable people in society who do not understand the tariffs? In fact, very few people understand them. A fundamental problem is the idea of a unit. I do not know what a unit is. I do not know whether my hon. Friend knows what a unit is. We must start using language such as "an hour's use of a bulb", or some other form of consumer language. Companies need to be much less old fashioned, and much better at consumer communication. They need to communicate the value of the units and what we are paying for them.

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The energy companies need to simplify the tariffs, but as she says, the language used to communicate also needs to change. The big six have a responsibility for communicating information in a way that is comprehensible and does not distort consumer choice. That is a fundamental issue. Ofgem has a responsibility here and the Government need to ensure that they keep the pressure on it continuously to monitor how information is distributed within this market to ensure that it is a truly competitive one. Ofgem must be on top of this, constantly monitoring to ensure that we get simplification both of the tariffs and of the information sent to consumers.

In the short term, as other hon. Members have mentioned, it is critical during the lead-up to this winter to maintain the winter fuel and cold weather payments, and to implement the warm home discount. Those are important short-term measures to maintain the situation and ensure that our most vulnerable residents are not put under pressure as they seek to heat their homes during what might be a very difficult winter.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making a considered speech, dealing with all the elements involved in this complex issue and specifically mentioning winter fuel allowances. On behalf of all our constituents, especially the vulnerable elderly, does he think it is good enough for the Government to say, "Because Labour was going to cut the winter fuel allowances for the over-80s and the under-80s, we are simply following suit"? Do we not owe it to our vulnerable elderly people at this time to ensure that those winter fuel allowances continue at their previous level?

James Morris: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but the Government had to make some decisions about spending and they matched what the previous Government had proposed for the winter fuel allowance. I think that was a fair and reasonable decision.

Sarah Newton: On that point, many more pensioners will benefit as a result of the warm home payment. Is it not a huge problem for pensioner households that many elderly people do not really understand all the benefits to which they are entitled. Year after year, Age UK runs campaigns to demonstrate how many millions of people are not collecting all the benefits to which they are entitled. If they did, their household incomes would improve and they would have more money. It is important that in talking specifically about winter benefits, we should remind our constituents to make sure that they claim all their benefits. They should go down to their citizens advice bureau, Age UK or the local Age Concern and get a benefit check so that they receive all the money to which they are entitled.

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the collection of benefits available. There is an issue about pensioners and other groups not knowing which benefits are available.

The Government are taking some short-term measures, but it is important to note that they need to take long-term measures because this problem will not be solved by a single silver bullet. The Government are going in the right direction. This debate has provided a useful airing of views across the House about how we tackle this important problem.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that the convention is that interventions should be short. Also, when addressing the House, a Member is supposed to address all of it, including the Speaker in the Chair, and not turn away so that the Speaker cannot attract the Member's attention should it be necessary to do so.

4.23 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I am pleased to take part in what I believe is a timely debate. There is general concern about the size of the energy bills that are hitting people right across the country. This is happening in the context of rising profits for the energy companies, while—despite what the global warmists are saying—we are increasingly having cold winters, which mean an increase in people's energy bills.

As I have said, the debate is timely because there is a general feeling that the Government may not be giving these matters the priority that they deserve. When a Secretary of State dismisses the problem by saying, "Well, phone around and find out what the alternative costs are", when energy companies are given a slap on the wrist but there is no real outcome, and when we are told, "Just grin and bear it, because some of this has to be done to save the world", it is understandable that people should detect a degree of complacency.

This is a particular issue for us in Northern Ireland. First, the profits of Northern Ireland Electricity have risen by 68% over the past year, which is commensurate with the increases in the profits of the big energy companies in Great Britain. Secondly, energy prices in Northern Ireland are about 14% higher than the average in Great Britain. Thirdly, fuel poverty in Northern Ireland is well in excess of the average in the rest of the United Kingdom, affecting 43.7% of households in comparison with the UK average of 21%.

Jim Shannon: My constituents spend 10% of their incomes on fuel, and 44% of them are experiencing fuel poverty. Strangford has the second highest level of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's decision to reduce the winter allowance will have an unfair impact on people in Northern Ireland, as against the rest of the United Kingdom?

Sammy Wilson: Yes, and I shall say more about that later.

Part of the problem is a direct result of Government policies that have an impact on households and businesses throughout the United Kingdom. About 50% of those who are in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland are over 60, but just as worrying is the fact that 27% of those who will find it difficult to pay their fuel bills—who will be, as we loosely term it, in fuel poverty—are in work. They are going out every day to do their business, and their wages are so low that they still find it difficult to pay. That is another reason for my belief that the debate is timely and will resonate throughout the United Kingdom.

I will not repeat all the many causes of the problem that have already been mentioned today, but I think it worth drawing attention to the way in which large energy companies have used the prices of raw materials to raise the prices that they charge consumers, and the fact that—as a number of Members have observed—there is not the same flexibility when prices fall. That is one of the reasons for the level of profits that companies are experiencing. As many Members have pointed out, in the short term some of those profits could be used to deal with the problems.

A second cause is lack of investment. Because of that lack of investment and because of the demand that exists, prices are bound to be fairly buoyant anyway, and there is a captive market. A third—I suspect that many people will secretly agree with this, but will not be prepared to say so openly—is the impact of the Government's climate change policies. When we say that because we want a low-carbon economy we will charge those who use carbon-based fuels in ways that cause carbon dioxide to be released into the atmosphere, and when we say that we will introduce policies to stop that happening, we cannot run away from the fact that such action will have implications for people's fuel bills throughout the United Kingdom. The facts are clear. This year, simply to deal with the renewables obligations, being forced to purchase electricity from renewable sources has added £1.8 billion to the cost of producing electricity, and by 2020 the cost will be £6 billion a year. According to the Department's own estimates, domestic consumers will face a 33% increase in the cost of electricity and non-domestic consumers such as industry will face an increase of 43%.

I support the motion, but it makes a rather glib reference to climate change. Many people will feel that they can agree with such sentiments, but behind them is the reality of what will happen to fuel bills: people will pay more for their energy. Denmark, not our country, has the highest costs per unit and the highest fuel bills, and Denmark produces 20% of its electricity from wind power. That is the highest proportion in Europe. The lowest costs are in France, which produces 75% of its energy from nuclear power.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the fact that France has the lowest energy costs serves to highlight that Governments of all colours have been short-sighted in not investing in new nuclear before, and that we ought to be going ahead with new nuclear now?

Sammy Wilson: I absolutely agree. I have consistently supported that, and back home have received some criticism for doing so, as people ask, "Are you therefore saying we should have a nuclear power station in Northern Ireland?" If it produces cheap electricity and deals with some of the problems people in my constituency face, of course I am happy to support that—although whether there are sufficient economies of scale in the Northern Ireland market to support a nuclear power station is another matter.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the short-sightedness of previous Governments, and I welcome the Secretary of State's U-turn. Although he tried to cover that up today, he has clearly performed a U-turn on this issue. When he was in opposition he opposed nuclear energy, but now that he is in government he supports it, although he adds about 100 caveats to that support—the conversion process may take a little longer than we expected.

Reference has been made to the possibility of huge shale gas finds in Lancashire. The relative costs of electricity generation are as follows: 2.2p per kW for gas-fired electricity as against 7.2p per kW for offshore wind farms. Offshore wind is therefore three and a half times more expensive.

We say that we want 30% of our electricity to be generated by offshore wind by 2030, but that has implications for consumers across the United Kingdom. Regardless of our views on climate change, there ought to be some honesty in this debate. I do not know what the impact on global temperatures might be if we were to decarbonise our economy and reduce our CO_2 emissions, which account for 2% of the world's CO_2 emissions, by 10% or 20% by 2020, but there will be a price to be paid by each of our constituents, and we ought to make that clear.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the increase in fuel prices will lead to many of our elderly and disabled people, who need heating most of all, not being able to afford it?

Sammy Wilson: Now that I have had my say on this particular part of the motion, I want to discuss some of the ways we can deal with the situation. We need to consider three periods. There are things we can do in the short term. Hon. Members have asked why pressure is not being put on the big energy companies to ensure that some of the windfall profits—I do not care what we call them, but we are talking about the increased profits—are redistributed in the form of lower prices. I understand that these companies have to make profits. If we want investment in the infrastructure for the future, there is no point saying that we want to strip profits from the companies that are going to have to make that investment. The question is whether those profits are excessive and whether, at this particular time, some of those profits should be going back to consumers. That could be in the form of price reductions, greater transparency about what is available or any of the suggestions that have been made, but the issue must be dealt with.

[Sammy Wilson]

The second issue to address is that of winter fuel payments, which was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds). Those payments have been reduced and it is not good enough for the Government to say, "We're following the same policy as the party that used to be the party of government." As I pointed out, part of this problem has been caused by Government policy and so it is essential that we find some way to help the most vulnerable. Of course it is going to cost money but this issue needs to be addressed.

In the medium term, we must examine how we help people to reduce their energy bills. That could be through what we in Northern Ireland call the warm homes scheme, but what the rest of the United Kingdom calls the Warm Front scheme. The warm homes scheme was introduced by my right hon. Friend and it has gone from strength to strength. It has taken a lot of households out of fuel poverty, although I take the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (John Robertson), which is that it does not matter how much is spent on some homes as there will not be a significant reduction in the energy people use so fuel poverty will remain. The warm homes scheme in Northern Ireland has not just been a way of dealing with the social problem of fuel poverty; it is labour-intensive and so has been a useful scheme in creating local employment—it has a high local multiplier effect—at a time when we are looking for opportunities.

In the longer term, we have to be realistic about green policies. I welcome the Chancellor's remarks that we should not be pursuing policies on decarbonising the economy if they place our economy at a disadvantage compared with others across the world. While the European Union is preaching about reducing carbon emissions, the German Government have a much more realistic view. They are actually investing in 20 coal-fired power stations and in nuclear, because they want to find ways of producing cheap energy. In the long term we have to look at our investment priorities and whether we are following the correct policy. If, in the long term, we wish to invest in that way, we need to consider how we are going to deal with the consequences.

4.38 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is always a pleasure to speak in these debates. The usual faces are here—the people who regularly show up when we discuss fuel poverty in Westminster Hall—and it is a pleasure to be debating with them.

I was intrigued by the shadow Secretary of State's reference to meerkats. I always think of them as cute, cuddly animals that cover the ground quickly, which may be an appropriate description of the Secretary of State. My dog's favourite toy is a meerkat, as was seen at last week's Westminster dog of the year show. The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) later asked what we are going to do about the situation. Given the fantastic adverts—dare I say it?—we are going to stand up for the consumer; anybody who watches "Meerkat Manor" will know that meerkats stand up and look around. I am not going to be overly critical of what the previous Government did, although it is a bit of a cheek to ask what this Government are doing given that no nuclear power stations had started being built under them.

We need to be constructive because this issue is very important for our constituents. That is the key point that we need to unite behind, and I am pleased that there will not be a Division on the motion.

I want to tackle something that came up in my exchanges with the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who is no longer in his place. I know that he is an absolutely fantastic champion on behalf of those in fuel poverty—especially for off-gas-grid households. I am not suggesting that the energy companies should be encouraged to make excessive profits; I think we should be critical friends to them, but we do have to be friends to them because this country needs £100 billion to be spent on energy infrastructure over the next 10 years, and it is absolutely right that that will come partly from the profits that those companies will make. I understand that, in effect, consumers are the people who make the profits for the companies, but, like anything else, if it comes in tax, it still comes from consumers—from our constituents. Let us not kid ourselves that we do not ultimately have to pay, together, for the infrastructure that our country desperately needs.

I welcome the contributions that were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who also is no longer in his place. He, too, has been a doughty champion for off-gas-grid households. Earlier today, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) and I were at a briefing about the Office of Fair Trading report that I have here. It is quite a weighty document, but it is double-sided, so the OFT was trying to be friendly to the environment. Members should read the report because, although the press notice did not make it sound very exciting, when one digs into it, one finds quite a lot that will prove very useful.

The hon. Member for North West Durham had an exchange with my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham about another issue that has been raised today—the OFT and how people were quoted one price and then expected to pay another. I am pleased to report that Carmarthenshire county council has successfully prosecuted a supplier for that practice. If we believe that that is happening in our areas, we must make sure that our county councils or city councils take full advantage of that ruling and ensure that they go after the suppliers that behave inappropriately towards our constituents at their most difficult time of need.

Let me mention some of the other contributions that have been made, including that of the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and the interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) and for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris). It is important that we make sure that our constituents are fully aware of the opportunities to seek advice on these matters. I thought that the criticism made of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State was a bit of a shame because I feel that there has been a genuine attempt to say to people, "There is information out there and there is an opportunity to switch, and we are going to try to make it easier to do so." They will encourage people to do that. People do not need to pay a standing charge if they wish to receive gas from companies. If one is a low user, it makes sense not to want to pay that.

I was at a dinner last night with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller) and we were talking about energy challenges for the next 30 years. People from the royal academies were saying that it was ridiculous that the pricing and tariff systems seem to incentivise greater use rather than less.

To return to being a critical friend of the energy companies, there is one practice that I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) would have intervened on me to make a point about if she were here, so I shall do it for her. I am talking about the practice whereby people pay so much a month by standing order or direct debit. I happen to know about this because I end up dealing with this situation for my mother—this might embarrass her. I work out that she somehow seems to be £400 in credit even though there is no way she is ever going to consume that much, but the company keeps taking the same sum each month if not increasing it. So I have to make the phone call once or twice a year and a big cheque comes back.

I experienced similar behaviour when I spoke on the phone with a very pleasant customer service adviser who was trying to persuade me that, for no particular reason, I would double the amount of gas that I would use in the next year. However, I was able to convince her that if she did not leave my standing order as it was, I would change supplier. We all know that that argument encourages companies to listen a bit more. I put out a call today to energy companies to be friendly to their consumers and to work on these issues. I say to them, "Do not use your consumers' direct debits or standing orders as cheap ways of borrowing, but help people to make sure that they are paying what they need to." I am not saying that people should be given false prices so that they end up with a huge bill at the end of the year. Energy companies need to make sure that the scheme works as it should, so that MPs do not have to keep writing to the companies to ensure that such practices are not tolerated.

Jim Shannon: In my constituency, and I suspect in many constituencies across the whole United Kingdom, elderly people come to me and ask, "Should it be oil? Should it be electric? Should it be coal?" Does the hon. Lady share my concern that there should be no penalty for those who want to transfer from one energy source to another? If after a year, or perhaps 18 months or two years, they want to transfer back, there should also not be a penalty from the energy company.

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The reason I am hesitating is that I probably need to think about it a bit more. There is undoubtedly a significant capital cost for switching between fuel sources. If one has a coal boiler and switches to a gas or oil boiler, there is a significant capital cost to that. I am not clear what is being done at present, but energy modelling should make it possible to model the prices and understand the impact.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her generosity in allowing me to intervene again. An example would be gas from different companies—we have two gas companies in Northern Ireland, and there are different electricity companies. The change should not be so costly. Sometimes unnecessary penalties are included.

Dr Coffey: In that case, I misunderstood the hon. Gentleman's original intervention. He makes a fair point. In discussions with the OFT we particularly focused on off-gas grid households and the terms and conditions that people sign up to unwittingly. Various regulations protect consumers from unfair trade contracts, but those can be complicated. There should be as few barriers to switching as possible. I hope the Government's actions earlier in the week will lead to that in Northern Ireland, as well as in Suffolk.

The House has heard more today about off-gas grid than it has for a while, but it is fair to say that those who do not have access to mains gas have considerably higher costs than they would if they had access to it. The percentage in fuel poverty is even worse. The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) referred to that in the context of Cornwall. According to the latest statistics that I saw, 23% of oil consumers are in fuel poverty, as opposed to 10% of those on mains gas and 13% of those on electricity. There are other heating sources, including liquefied petroleum gas.

Let me complete my comments on heating oil. The OFT study found that the market has been generally competitive. I know that came as rather a surprise to some Members, especially the statistic that 97% of households that are affected have access to four or more suppliers. The OFT said that it would share that information with us so that we can make it as widely known to our constituents as possible.

One aspect that the report did not cover but which we can help with relates to intelligent consumers. That is where buying groups come into their own. There are several such groups around the country. I commend one village in my constituency, Boyton, which has a scheme that covers every single household. People in every household are made aware of the scheme when they move in. That is a little better than my own village, where there are several buying schemes, but my landlady forgot to include me in the one over the summer, so I will have to shell out next month. It is important that villages and parishes can reach out to their neighbours and make sure that they are fully aware and take full advantage of the opportunities.

Reference has been made to the Energy and Climate Change Committee's 2010 report on fuel poverty. One of its recommendations was particularly useful for those buying oil, but unfortunately it was batted off to the Treasury. Many consumers, if they are organised, buy their oil in the summer when prices are lower because of seasonal pricing. A plea has been made that the Secretary of State should speak to the Treasury to see whether there might be an opportunity for pensioners to receive winter fuel payments at different times of the year so that they match outgoings for the purchase of oil.

I also inadvertently misled the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) when I said that electricity companies automatically give a dual fuel discount to those people without access to gas. That is what I had been told by one of the big six energy companies. It turns out that only two of the big six do that, EDF Energy and E.ON, so that is something else that the other companies could do.

Another important consideration relating to off-gas-grid households is that many of the things the previous Government rightly did to focus on updating equipment meant that a lot of the money for Warm Front was

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

directed at houses that had gas. In a way that makes sense; if significant energy reductions can be achieved by focusing on certain households, that is a good use of money. Anyone who wants a return would see that as a good use of capital. However, it meant that, in effect, many households missed out. We all know that older housing stock is much more difficult to treat, which is why I have made the plea before, and will make it again, that the Government should ensure that they do not forget rural households when trying to ensure that we all benefit from energy efficiency measures.

I have been using my iPad in the Chamber today in order to contribute to the debate. I have been able to check that rolls of Wickes ultraseal premium draught excluder—other DIY suppliers are available—cost a grand total of £3.49. I will take advantage of that this weekend, because I used it last year to provide extra seals for doors and windows in my house and I saw my consumption of gas fall by 18%. For £3.49, that is quite a good return. I encourage anyone and everyone to use the cheapest and simplest measures, such as draught excluders and the closing of doors, in older properties. I am not being patronising or saying that people must sit in front of one little heater; I am simply saying that there are some simple things we can do to ensure that we use less energy and that there are cheap and low-cost solutions.

I agree fundamentally with something that the hon. Member for Ynys Môn mentioned earlier. I feel very strongly that Ofgem should take ownership of all gas consumers. The Office of Fair Trading has done a good job with its inquiry, but people have to go to their trading standards officer and go down all sorts of other complicated routes.

I have just realised that I am out of time and must sit down.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Exactly. I remind Members that the wind-ups are due to start at 6.30 pm and that a large number of Members still wish to speak. It is not compulsory to take the full 12 minutes or necessary to take interventions. Please bear in mind the number of Members who wish to speak.

4.53 pm

John Robertson (Glasgow North West) (Lab): I will try not to use the whole 12 minutes available, as in many ways my contribution will be a repeat of a speech I gave in an Adjournment debate not long ago. I have listened intently to all Members who have spoken, particularly the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), who said that he wanted honesty in the debate. Having heard history being reinvented and regurgitated so many times by Members on both sides of the House, I think that honesty is sometimes the first thing that goes out of the window.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on nuclear energy. Interestingly, Labour Members used to raise the issue of nuclear energy much more often than the then Opposition, who ran away and hid every time the word "nuclear" came up. I am sure that the hon. Member for Angus (Mr Weir) will say, "And I wish it had just stayed that way."

I can tell the Secretary of State, who unsurprisingly is not in his place, that doing nothing and giving up on things is just not an option for people. My predecessor in representing my constituency, the late Donald Dewar, once said:

> "Cynicism, together with unrealistic expectation, are the two great bugbears of politics."

Those words were ringing in my ears when I heard about the energy summit at Downing street. The cynicism is to think that there is nothing we can do to regulate prices, and the unrealistic expectation is the Secretary of State's thought that asking those in fuel poverty to use less energy is a solution to the situation; it obviously is not.

The average household has seen energy costs rise by about £300 in the past year, and Ofgem announced last week that the profit margin for energy companies has risen to £125 per customer, from £15 in June. With 13,500 pensioner households in my constituency alone—it has one of the highest concentrations of pensioners in Europe—and with the highest number of single women pensioners in the entire country, according to the Library, Members will understand why this issue is of grave importance to me as a local MP, and why I raise it today as I have on other occasions. As Members can imagine, my constituency surgeries are currently dominated by this issue.

According to official figures, 65% of single pensioner households and about half of small pensioner households in Scotland were classified as poor in 2009, making them more likely than any other type of household to be affected by rising energy prices.

When I was first elected in 2000, four out of five single pensioner households in Scotland lived on an annual income of £15,000 or less; today that figure is 60%— admittedly lower than the percentage when I was elected, but the level is still unacceptable. According to Scottish Government figures, almost one quarter of single pensioner households and one fifth of smaller pensioner households in Scotland are deemed to be in extreme fuel poverty, which means that they spend more than 20% of their disposable income on heating their homes. In addition, in Scotland 8% of pensioners live in absolute poverty and one in 10 over-65s are classified as materially deprived. Members will therefore understand why I keep telling people that we are on the verge of a fuel poverty crisis.

What causes fuel poverty? There are three root causes: low incomes, poor housing and, most of all, high energy prices.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): My constituency is 1,200 feet above sea level, its winters can be bitter, and the latest figures show that it has 40 excess winter deaths every year. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have failed to stop the super-profits of some energy companies, and do not have a coherent plan to help families with their fuel bills this year?

John Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will come on to the points that he makes, but to answer his last point, I sometimes wonder whether the Government are helping the energy companies make those obscene profits, rather than stopping them.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): I hear the hon. Gentleman's comment on super-profits, but perhaps he will tell the House which way he voted on the windfall tax proposed on this side of the House on those same energy companies. They are making a 60% return on capital employed in a medium-sized field in the North sea, while the people whom he criticises today in the retail sector are making much less. Which way did he vote, and why has he changed his mind?

John Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is talking about a completely different area. I will talk about windfall taxes later, but suffice it to say that that proposal would have stifled what we were trying to do at the time. The hon. Gentleman thought that that was a good idea, but that is because he was on his side of the House and I was on my side of the House.

Eradicating fuel poverty involves tackling all three of the root causes that I mentioned. I have some sympathy with the energy companies as regards prices rising as a result of the influence of the wholesale energy market. As a member of the Energy and Climate Change Committee, I am fully aware that wholesale prices have risen by 30% this year, but I am also aware that they are lower than a few years ago. According to Bloomberg, in autumn 2008 the wholesale price for our gas hit prices of 70p a therm, compared with 59p a therm today, showing that wholesale gas prices have dropped by 15% since then. Similarly, prices in the wholesale electricity market reached £120 per megawatt-hour in autumn 2008; today, they are £51.20 per megawatt-hour, which is less than half the price back then.

As a result, there is great suspicion by many, including Ofgem, that the big six have not been passing on wholesale market price reductions. Surprise, surprise! As far as I am concerned, these are anti-competitive acts, especially towards smaller energy companies. Chapter II of the Competition Act 1998 prohibits the abuse of dominant position in a market by one or more undertakings which may affect the trade within the UK. According to the competition law guidelines,

> "Conduct may be abusive when, through the effects of conduct on the competitive process, it adversely affects consumers directly (for example, through the prices charged) or indirectly (for example, conduct which reduces the intensity of existing competition or of potential competition). A dominant undertaking is under special responsibility not to allow its conduct to impair undistorted competition."

I have previously accused the big six of acting like a cartel on many occasions. That is supported by the nature of the recent price rises, whereby tacit collusion appears to be taking place as the big six followed one by one in raising prices at a similar rate, following a price leader. Overall, it is debatable whether that accusation would be upheld in a court of law, but it is a fair political point to make.

The Government have not pursued every angle on energy prices, especially as one of their current positions is to say that pensioners in Glasgow and the rest of Scotland should use less gas and electricity this winter. According to the findings of the Hills fuel poverty review, which is out today, 2,700 people will die in England and Wales as a result of this year's energy price rises by the big six energy companies. Should these people really take the advice of the Prime Minister and his Secretary of State to use less energy? I am sure that the Minister will have a copy of the review, and I suggest that he study it. The fact that so many people will lose their lives as a result of energy price rises means that we have to consider this seriously. I do not make that as a political point but as a point about human beings.

Ian Lavery: It was said earlier that probably 36,000 people died last year as a result of cold-related illness. My hon. Friend said that 2,700 people will die because of the price increases. Is that in addition to the 36,000?

John Robertson: Yes. According to the Hills report, that will happen because of the increases. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) said that that means that in every constituency in the country, four people will die for that reason. That bears thinking about.

I would like VAT on utility bills to be zero-rated, but as far as I am aware there is an EU law against that. It is a matter for next week's debate—perhaps it will be raised by Conservative Members—which I will probably ignore of course. I should like the Government to reverse the cut in the winter fuel payment. We heard earlier that they were going to maintain the level established by the previous Government. However, the previous Government had a record of consolidating the money at the end of the financial year, and we will never know whether they would have consolidated the £100 level because we did not win the election, unfortunately. As a result, elderly people in this country are now suffering.

Early-day motion 2279, which I signed last night, asks the Secretary of State, or Ofgem at the very least, openly to consider imposing a financial penalty on energy suppliers for anti-competitive behaviour in the energy market—or at least to remind energy companies of their social and competitive responsibilities and the consequences if they forget them. At times it feels as though Ofgem and the Government offer too many carrots and not enough sticks to the big six. Ofgem can impose a maximum financial penalty of 10% of an energy company's turnover if it is seen to act anti-competitively. I suggest that it has been proven that that is happening. However, in its 11 years of existence, Ofgem has not once levied the maximum fine on an energy company.

If such a fine was imposed, the money could be collected by the Treasury and put in the Consolidated Fund, and the Prime Minister could tell his Chancellor to redistribute it to the hard-pressed customers in our constituencies this winter. How much would a 10% financial penalty raise? According to the Library, using the revenue figures for 2009-10, we could raise £9.5 billion from just three of the big six, with £2.4 billion coming from British Gas alone. Alternatively, a collective penalty levied on the total sales of gas and electricity to the domestic sector, which were £27 billion in 2010, would raise £2.7 billion. Clearly, money could be raised to help people this winter not through a windfall tax, but by using the enforcement powers that are already there. However, there needs to be the political will to do that, and to ensure that our irregular regulator is doing all it can.

Furthermore, I strongly suspect that behind these price rises we will find that the companies have grossly failed to stockpile energy reserves and to hedge adequately against future price rises. There may be a number of

[John Robertson]

reasons for that, but I think that one is ineptitude. I also think that the answer lies in the fact that they have no incentive to do so.

I try to represent my constituents at all times. There is a group of people in my constituency who cannot access the internet in any way. Glasgow has the lowest uptake of internet access of any city in the country. We also know that very few elderly people are connected to the internet. Therefore, despite the calls from the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for people to go and find something cheaper, those people are left with what they have got, particularly those who live in houses made of concrete blocks that cannot have cavity wall insulation or any other energy efficiency measures installed. There are 400 tariffs for them to choose between, if they can understand them. The Minister could not, and I am not surprised. Left to their own devices, those people will have either to continue as they are or to switch the heating off. Consequently, 2,700 people in England and Wales will be added to the statistics, including people in my constituency.

5.8 pm

Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am sure that all Members are here today for the same reason: our constituents are struggling with the excruciating price of fuel. I will explore three practical points that might help, if the Government will allow me. The first relates to supply and the other two to upward price distortions that I believe could be removed or alleviated.

Shale gas has been mentioned and I will not go over the same ground. It seems that we have vast, abundant and cheap sources of gas in this country. We should be going through a shale gas revolution. I was glad that the Secretary of State spoke relatively warmly of the resource earlier, but I noticed that he moved quickly on to carbon capture and storage. I would like to bring to the House's attention an article in *The Wall Street Journal* today entitled, "EU Weighs Pullback on Cutting Emissions", which has the subtitle, "Commission's Energy Department Urges EU to Reconsider Energy Transition Absent a Broader Emissions Deal". I hope that the Secretary of State will not crucify the British people upon a cross of carbon, because if we can have a shale gas revolution I certainly hope we will. The imperative to produce cheap energy is clear, and many Members have set out the case with great talent and passion.

Sammy Wilson: I hope that the hon. Gentleman noticed that the Secretary of State talked about the capital cost that carbon capture and storage would add to a power station that had to use it. He talked about a figure of £1 billion plus the running costs afterwards, which would add significantly to the costs of producing energy from gas.

Steve Baker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It seems that these days we throw billions around casually, but those are enormous sums of money.

I turn, then, to more billions that are being thrown around. I have learned from Matthew Sinclair's "Let Them Eat Carbon" that the EU emissions trading scheme is costing European consumers €15.5 billion a year and British consumers €2.2 billion a year. It seems to me that if we are truly concerned about what the poor and the strivers are paying for energy, we should look extremely carefully at such distortions to market prices. I note that because the carbon price collapsed under the EU ETS, we are now looking at a carbon floor price of £30 a tonne. Having tried to introduce a particular market-based mechanism and found that it does not work, we are now introducing a particular piece of price fixing. I am not at all convinced that that is a good idea.

Traditionally, Governments have interfered to pick winners, but it seems that at the moment they might be interfering to pick losers. I note that under feed-in tariffs, onshore wind receives £45 per megawatt-hour, whereas solar panels receive £400 per megawatt-hour. I am not sure those prices are a good use of taxpayers' money, or of the system of feed-in tariffs, in the context of the shale gas resources that exist. I might go so far as to say that we seem to be entering some kind of Hegelian dialectic, in which on one hand we agonise over the price of energy and on the other hand we implement Government policies that seem deliberately to elevate energy prices, in the hope that some synthesis will emerge.

Dr Whitehead: Before the hon. Gentleman gets completely carried away with the shale gas paradise, does he not understand that it is an unconventional gas supply and therefore very expensive to extract? Does he also understand that Deutsche Bank, in its recent review of energy prices, stated that unconventional gas supplies in Europe would have no discernible effect on future gas supplies, because of increasing demand across European and north American markets as a whole?

Steve Baker: I think perhaps the hon. Gentleman and I will have to put our researchers in a room and have them fight it out, because my information is that the Deutsche Bank report has stated that a quarter of UK households could be driven into fuel poverty by being priced out of the market; that the most effective policy to bring energy costs down would be to abandon our unilateral renewables obligation, which would save 15% on costs; and that shale gas utilisation would save a further 15%.

David Mowat: It is not true to say that shale gas is more expensive than conventional gas. In the US, gas prices are now 50% of those on the European hub. That is a huge and unprecedented thing to have happened, and it is why the US is about to become a net exporter of gas. It has decoupled gas and oil prices due to shale gas. I am not saying that we can do that easily, but it has happened in the US, and it is wrong to say that shale gas is more expensive than other methods.

Steve Baker: I am grateful, and with that I will perhaps move past shale gas. My point was that there are enormous, abundant resources of shale gas. Of course there are problems, but as an engineer I just see problems to be solved and risks to be mitigated. I think we should get on with it. We must also remember the points that I touched on about the price distortions that we are deliberately introducing into the market, including the subsidising of large corporations through surplus permits to emit, which have a market value. Such distortions in the market tend to push prices up.

Of course, prices are expressed in money, and I wish to move on to my favourite subject—the distortions that have been introduced to the market through the financial system. I have a wonderful chart before me that prices crude oil from a base figure of 100 in 1945. It shows that the oil price has only been high and volatile since 1971. The two lines—one is US dollars and one is gold grams—are coincident until 1971, but once we came off Bretton Woods and the dollar was decoupled from gold, oil prices were suddenly high and volatile. I showed the chart to an EU energy regulator and he was astonished because all the main events in the history of crude oil prices are simply missing from the price in gold.

Let me move on to the chart that shows crude oil simply priced in gold and blown up. We can see that oil in gold is cheaper now than it was in 1950 and that the oscillations have been pretty much around the same mean. I have other charts relating to gold and they show that gas prices are cheaper today in gold than they were in 1994.

It seems to me that if we are serious about energy prices, we ought to be asking serious questions about the value of money. Right now, one of the biggest problems we face is that "Helicopter Ben" Bernanke is printing dollars and distorting energy prices worldwide. That brings us back to the imperative that has been discussed: people will be in fuel poverty, choosing between heating and eating.

I ask the Government to consider how we can deliver a shale gas revolution. I want them to consider along with the EU Commission whether we should continue aggressive green policies in isolation. I want them to consider those policies and whether it is sensible to keep pushing up prices. Finally, I want them at least to consider some of the monetary effects on energy prices that, in my view, are now crucifying us all.

5.16 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I am pleased to have managed to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, to be called to speak in this important debate. In the UK, 6.4 million homes are in fuel poverty and that number continues to rise. That is the number of households spending 10% or more of their income on their energy bills.

There are two key factors: energy prices and household incomes. Fuel prices continue to rise at astronomical rates and Government policies have left families in this country seriously squeezed. At the same time, the six most dominant energy firms, which, as I understand it, control 99% of the market, have seen their profits increase to £125 per person. That is absolutely scandalous. The figure has increased from £15 to £125 since June, so no wonder our constituents are seriously concerned about those companies taking them for a ride. My own father—who is a constituent of mine—calls it daylight robbery. Given what my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (John Robertson) has said, I think that is worse than daylight robbery. It goes beyond robbery with violence and is tantamount, to me, to corporate manslaughter. It is estimated that 2,700 people will die this year as a result of the increase in fuel prices. That is an absolute disgrace.

It is important to recognise that, in the last quarter alone, such profits equate to billions of pounds. It shocks me to hear the Secretary of State defend the energy companies, saying that they are not the Salvation Army. Is it not time that we looked at this carefully? People are deciding between eating and turning the central heating on, so it is perhaps time for a little philanthropy from those companies.

The Government's rhetoric is not good enough. We are most certainly not "all in this together". It is not enough for the Prime Minister to arrange a publicity stunt with the energy bosses and then tell my constituents to shop around, switch energy supplier, insulate their loft spaces and save. It is dreadfully patronising to those people who have already attempted that but have found navigating the system extremely complicated. Indeed, the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) experienced that when he attempted to change suppliers.

The Government could call for an investigation into allegations of mis-selling, but they have not done so. Consumers who have been ripped off by companies should be properly compensated. In my view, that is the type of thing that the Secretary of State should have said when he addressed the House from the Dispatch Box. The Government should tell energy companies to use their soaring profits to help families and businesses with crippling energy bills.

We need a mandatory social tariff. Energy suppliers should be forced to charge less to their most vulnerable customers, and I am confused as to why the Prime Minister did not ask for that in his energy summit. The Government need to stand up to the powerful vested interests in the energy industry, and to provide help, rather than patronising people. They are out of touch. Cutting support for the most vulnerable is absolutely appalling, which brings me on to the winter fuel allowance.

The Prime Minister's decision to cut the winter fuel allowance will affect thousands of pensioners, including many hundreds in my constituency—*[Interruption.]* The Minister says something from a sedentary position that I cannot quite make out, but I wish he would listen and allow me to make the points that I want to make, because if he did so, he would learn something about real people in my constituency, who are suffering quite severely.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The reality is that the allowance was introduced by the previous Government on a temporary basis. For the year after the election, no money whatever was allocated to it. The allowance was a temporary measure, and this Government have continued the policy of the Labour Government. We have not cut it; that is what the previous Government planned to do.

Karl Turner: That is absolute nonsense. This Government are running the country, and winter fuel payments have been cut by £50 for over-60s and by £100 for over-80s.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Once again, the Minister has given an alibi. If the previous Labour Government planned what he says they did, he could change it. It is very simple.

Karl Turner: That was my point—the Government are in charge.

[Karl Turner]

Labour's Warm Front grant has helped more than 2 million vulnerable households in England since its inception in June 2000, but this Government are phasing it out completely.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Karl Turner: Not at the moment.

As I have said, household income is a key factor in fuel poverty, but the Government's economic record on that makes grim reading. Unemployment in Kingston upon Hull East is currently about 11.5% and it looks set to increase. The Chancellor's mistake with the VAT increase costs the average family £450 a year and a pensioner couple £250 a year, which is on top of the ever-increasing cost of energy. In addition, food inflation is at 6.2%.

Energy prices and the greed of the big six is forcing households throughout the country into fuel poverty. Their greed is akin to the greed of the bankers. A profit margin of £125 per person when families are facing a choice between a decent meal and a warm home is utterly irresponsible. The energy companies have been increasing their profits substantially while preying on people who have no choice but to buy from one of the big six.

The Prime Minister's energy summit represented a demonstrable failure to act. All we heard from the Government on Monday was their intention to write to those who are struggling, encouraging them to switch to a new deal. It is patronising to suggest that many have not already done this. According to the Government, if energy bills are too high, the customer is to blame. It is absolutely shameful. The Government desperately need to get a grip of these companies and take some positive action. I welcome the fact that Government Members will be supporting the Opposition motion today, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), the shadow Secretary of State, has said, people need warm homes, not warm words, from this Tory-led Government.

5.25 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to make what I intend will be a brief contribution to this important debate. It is timely because, as so many hon. Members have said, this is a matter of the first importance to so many of our constituents and many of the most vulnerable households. Again as has been said, many are making a choice between heating and eating. However, as the *Financial Times* pointed out last week, on trends that we have seen, it would not be too long before the average household is at risk of falling into fuel poverty. I know that Members on both sides of the House want to get to grips with this problem, so it does not have to be a party political issue. I am afraid, though, that in her opening remarks, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) made it so.

There is much merit in the Opposition day motion, and the Government Front Bench team have said that they will not be opposing it. I do not suppose that it would be in order for me to suggest amendments at this stage, but long as the motion is, I think that it would benefit from the insertion of seven words. The first line reads:

> "this House believes that the energy market does not serve the public interest".

I would suggest inserting after "energy market" the words: "that we, the Labour party, presided over". The Government took office after a Government who allowed extensive fuel poverty to persist, who failed to get to grips with the complexity in the market, who had no green deal and who were well off the pace on nuclear power, and all that time of course the now Leader of the Opposition had more than a passing association with energy policy. By contrast, the coalition Government have come in with bold plans to address all those issues.

There are important community-based initiatives, such as oil clubs, which have been mentioned once or twice, and organisations such as Greening Petersfield and Greening Alton and Holybourne, in my constituency, which are working with some of the most vulnerable people to take sensible, simple measures to better insulate their homes and to save money. Although there are many aspects to this debate, I want to talk briefly about just two: first, the implication of the green deal for the prices that, in particular, the most vulnerable people are paying and the need to ensure that they share in the benefits of the green deal; and, secondly, the need to tackle market complexity.

I welcome the green deal hugely. It is an innovative approach to this practical issue and could contribute to employment and growth—it is investment in the truest sense of the word. However, we need a few reassurances, particularly on how small businesses will share in the work and on how the quality of workmanship will be guaranteed. Specific to energy prices, however, I hope that the Minister will say something about how the green deal will work for people on pre-payment meters and about how the interest rate regime will ensure that those households and consumers considered the "highest risks" will not be effectively priced-out of the benefits arising from the green deal.

Luciana Berger: We fully support the green deal, which we piloted when Labour was in government in the pay-as-you-save scheme. I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about pre-payment meters and interest rates, which were two points that we laboured in the Committee stage of the Energy Bill, sadly without getting answers. I know that I should be making a short intervention, but I would like to return to his point about the community element. We sought in Committee to secure lower administration charges for those smaller businesses, community projects, social enterprises, charities and co-operatives that want to take part in the green deal, but the Government rejected our amendments. Will the hon. Gentleman ask them to reconsider that?

Damian Hinds: The fact that the hon. Lady made those points does not make them bad points, and there will be further detail to come. Things do not necessarily have to be on the face of the legislation. As the green deal is introduced, I am sure that ensuring that the most vulnerable households share the benefits will be high on Ministers' list of priorities.

The second point that I want to cover briefly is about complexity in the market. We know that there are hundreds of tariffs on the market—one of which, slightly inexplicably, involves getting a free football shirt. In some ways, complexity in the energy market is a reflection of increasing complexity in consumer markets in general. Those visiting the Sainsbury's wine aisle now need to take a Hewlett Packard scientific calculator to work out the best deal, whereas those looking for a savings account or a credit card deal need to spend quite a long time working out the best deal in the first place and, more importantly, need to be sharp and ensure that they cancel it at the right time to get the savings. Things are becoming harder for consumers, but they are especially difficult with energy because it is that much less tangible and has that much more complexity to it.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making an excellent speech. On empowering consumers, one of the challenges is that most people are incentivised to switch accounts when their prices are hiked, only to find a few weeks later that their new supplier has also hiked its prices. Does he agree that one solution would be to block price rises for new customers for the first six months after signing up to a new tariff?

Damian Hinds: My understanding of the recent Ofgem announcement is that there is some provision for ensuring that what it calls innovative price tariffs must have a fixed element to them—funnily enough, I was just coming to more or less that very point. I welcome Ofgem's new requirement for a single, simple tariff per payment type, but we need to ensure that that does not beguile us. I used to work in the hotel business, and anyone who has ever stayed in a hotel might be familiar with the rack rate. That is the price pinned on the back of the door, which is nominally a perfect reference price that people can use to compare hotels. The problem is that hardly anybody pays the rack rate; rather, all the competition centres on the other rates. That does not mean that such rates are a bad thing, but we would not necessarily be able to say that we had thereby solved the problem.

When it comes to solving the problem, we have to remember that the comparison websites—all the puns about meerkats and Go Compare were getting a bit much earlier—are commercial enterprises. Although they allow people to compare, the click-through payments that they receive mean that they have an incentive for screen biasing. The Consumer Focus code and accreditation are welcome, but that is not quite the same thing as ensuring that comparison sites operate absolutely perfectly in the public interest. I hope that it might be possible to consider a new model of comparison websites to sit alongside those that already exist, which would be broadly modelled on a website called Lenders Compared. I do not know how many hon. Members are familiar with Lenders Compared—probably not that many—but it was set up as a result of the Competition Commission investigation into high-cost lending and enables consumers to compare the cost of various home credit operators and others.

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying, some of which I agree with, but I wonder whether he will take up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (John Robertson) made about many people on low incomes, particularly those with disabilities, not having access to websites. I met a constituent this week with a visual impairment who is finding it extremely difficult to get information that he can access easily.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady is absolutely spot-on; indeed, I was just coming to that point. There are organisations and individuals who assist people with such matters, and a simple comparison mechanism could be very useful for them, too.

I raised the question of how many hon. Members had heard of a website called Lenders Compared. I suspect that the answer is not many, which illustrates a problem. It is all very well having a pure comparison website, but if no one has heard of it and no one looks at it, it is not doing its job. Such sites therefore need some marketing spend behind them. I suggest that Ministers might have a discussion with the industry about creating such a service, to be funded by the industry itself. People might ask why the industry would want to do that, as it would cost it money, but I think we might be surprised at how much it might be willing to consider, if not fully welcome, such a proposal, because of the pay-per-click marketing fees that it would save as a result of that tranche of its business going through such a site. So, that is my suggestion du jour for Ministers. I am grateful to you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am going to try to fit in as many speakers as I can. I am therefore reducing the time limit to eight minutes, with the usual extra time for interventions.

5.35 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. This subject is of huge interest to the energy-consuming public, and these are matters of real fear and anxiety to many of them. We should remember that many of these British companies that are making big—even obscene—profits right now are the same utility companies, energy companies and communications companies that used to be owned by the British people. Whatever artificial market situation successive Governments put in place to try to manage those companies' profits and markets, they continue to operate as a virtual oligopoly. There are few suppliers in the market, and entry into that market is virtually impossible. Those suppliers' actions therefore have a disproportionately negative impact on prices.

The bottom line is that those companies were nationalised for a good reason—namely, to stop them using their strategic position to drive up prices. Ironically, we now find that our most strategic energy, water and communications companies are foreign-owned and are demonstrably using their position to drive up huge profits for a small number of senior staff and shareholders. We have moved from a position in which all of us owned and benefited from those companies to one in which only a small number benefit massively while the rest of us lose out big style.

I am not suggesting that we should renationalise those companies, but the present situation is clearly not working for the consumers of this country. It needs

[Pat Glass]

urgent reform. I am really pleased that the Government are supporting the Opposition's motion today, including the part that calls on them to

> "reform the energy market to break the dominance of the Big Six by requiring them to sell power into a pool, allowing new businesses to enter the market, increasing competition and driving down energy bills for families and businesses".

To me, that means breaking up the big six, and I hope that that will be the Government's policy. I also hope that the Opposition will hold them to account on that.

It is the greed of those energy companies that has brought about this situation. This year, they have fallen over themselves to announce big increases. British Gas went first, increasing its gas prices by 18% and its electricity prices by 16%, but that was quickly followed by similar increases from Scottish Power and the other four. This might not be a cartel as we know it, operating in smoke-filled rooms, but it appears to be a cartel that operates by watching Sky News to see who is going to go first before rushing in with similar price increases. To me, that is still a cartel, and it is the British consumer who is losing out.

British Gas defends its massive price increases and blames us, the customers. It tells us that we are not paying enough to reflect the increased cost of gas and electricity on the wholesale markets, and that that will depress its profits for the first half of this year. Not surprisingly, organisations such as Consumer Focus and Which? disagree with that, telling us that wholesale costs have actually gone down and are still about one third lower than their 2008 peak, yet the energy companies' profits have risen substantially over the same period. So, costs on the wholesale market have gone down, and energy profits have gone up. For example, British Gas has had a 44% increase in its gas profits and a 21% increase in its electricity profits. Last year, British Gas's residential business—not its whole business; just the residential part—made £740 million profit. I am not against companies making a profit, and I believe that everyone is worthy of their hire, but that is obsessive, and it is the poorest people in this country who are paying most.

All that leaves British energy consumers facing massive increases in the cost of energy at a time when wages are being frozen, food prices are rising, petrol and diesel prices are soaring and travel costs are ever increasing. About 9 million households in Britain face an average dual fuel increase of £190 a year. We were told last week that the energy companies made £120 profit from the average family on a dual fuel deal, increasing from £15 in June this year. That is nearly a 700% increase for the average family.

The Prime Minister's response, therefore, is disappointing to say the least. He had the energy companies in on Monday, but instead of showing them the instruments of torture, he seems to have introduced them to the tea and coffee-making facilities. It is just not good enough. We desperately need the Prime Minister to start taking these people on. It was an opportunity wasted.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument to show how these massive energy cost rises are having an impact on the individual consumer. Does she agree that there is also a negative impact on British business, particularly on high-energy-using British manufacturing businesses, so it is yet another struggle for them in these difficult times?

Pat Glass: I agree, and it is not just businesses either; it is schools and colleges, too, that are being driven hard by these increases.

The Energy Secretary's response has been equally disappointing. He has given us a White Paper on reform of the electricity market, but in my view, it is big on complicated legal mechanisms while saying nothing or very little about the impact of these increases on households. He has given us a list of his meetings with small providers and he has launched yet another Ofgem review into energy prices—the 18th such review so far. Personally, I do not find that impressive; I think the Energy Secretary should be doing more.

Finally, we are moving towards another winter and the nights are drawing in with temperatures beginning to drop. My constituents are telling me in my surgeries—not just now and again, but every time—that they are having to choose between putting the gas on or feeding the kids. Frankly, in the sixth biggest economy in the world, nobody should have to make that choice. I am pleased that the Government are supporting the Opposition motion, but they need to get a grip on this problem—and fast.

5.42 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) in the light of how this debate has developed and evolved. She has made a constructive and considered contribution to a debate that is going to conclude with a clear consensus, whereby this Parliament can move forward and encourage the Government to do a great deal more.

Ian Lavery *rose—*

Andrew George: I do not think I have said anything yet, but I am happy to give way.

Ian Lavery: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he as surprised as I am that Government Members are supporting the Opposition motion when it is highly critical of many aspects of energy prices and Government policies?

Andrew George: No, I am not at all surprised that the Government have decided that, on balance, looking at the motion—it could, of course, be tinkered with—it says a lot of the right things. We need to start coalescing around the issue to move it forward effectively in the interests of the nation. My concern is that we started this debate in the customary and traditional manner of a yah-boo pantomime. There is a sense that we are obliged to endure the opening of Opposition day debates in that way, so I am pleased that we seem to have moved on from the traditional type of exchanges—when we hear the trading of "It's your fault" followed by "No, it's yours", which takes us nowhere and certainly does not impress the country as a whole—and identified areas on which we can agree. That is what the country wants us to do. Rather than wasting our energy—if Members will excuse the pun—on the yah-boo pantomime, we should build on the constructive speeches made by

Members in all parts of the House today. Given that there is a great deal of agreement among us, we must ask what it is that we all agree we can do.

I accept that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is a self-declared ambassador for the sharp-elbowed middle classes who will be scrutinising their bills, understanding what they mean, and chopping and changing on a regular basis, but the fact is that 60% of the population do not do that. Although it was rightly said at the energy summit that there should be a more transparent and effective way in which consumers could become informed and make informed choices, the fact is that many people lead busy lives, cannot penetrate the opacity of the bills with which they are presented, and do not understand how choices can be made.

I may not be a member of the sharp-elbowed middle classes, but I am so busy doing my job that I know more about my constituents' finances and bills than about my own. I never get around to dealing with these issues, and I would not recommend anyone to follow any of the financial decisions that I make about my own life. I am sure that many other Members have the same problem.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) referred to a five-point plan. Usually three is about as much as we can count up to in the Chamber, but five is very helpful. He spoke of the need for greater transparency, and the possibility of regulating standing charges. I think that that idea should be thrown into the melting pot, and I hope that the Government will consider it.

Others, including the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), suggested that, given the profiteering of the big six, a windfall tax should be introduced. We know that we cannot opt, as a country, for a Soviet-style state-owned energy system—and there is no appetite for that in any part of the House—but the fact is that, although the system will of course continue to be in private hands, we need to do something about the profiteering. The idea of introducing a windfall tax, or threatening to introduce one if the energy companies do not start demonstrating that they are prepared to provide a genuine and a better service rather than simply putting money into the pockets of their shareholders, might also be thrown into the melting pot. We need to do more to incentivise fuel efficiency, which is not something that energy companies favour at present. They want to sell their energy and do not necessarily want people to conserve it, and we need regulations that will encourage that to happen.

Earlier, I mentioned rising block tariffs, which exist peripatetically more or less throughout the industry. I hope that the Government will think about those, because they plainly disincentivise fuel efficiency in the domestic market. Many other Members have mentioned key meters and pre-payment arrangements, and we should also consider special groups such as park home owners. The hon. Members for Ynys Môn and for Hexham (Guy Opperman), among others, made telling references to off-grid energy and, in particular, to the LPG market.

We should not ignore a minority group, namely the rural poor, and in particular the fuel-poor in rural areas. We should bear in mind that 29% of households with oil-fired central heating are in fuel poverty. It is clear from the position in my constituency—it includes the Isles of Scilly, which means adding a further 20% to the LPG costs—that many people are struggling to pay their fuel bills in rural as well as urban areas. The Office of Fair Trading report is of course welcome. It suggests that most customers now sign two-year exclusive contracts with their supplier. That is the maximum time allowed following the Competition Commission investigation. Under those contracts, the supplier usually retains ownership of the tank, which makes it hard to switch supplier if prices rise. The Government must keep an eye on that.

In debates such as this we always hear from the climate change deniers—the environmental equivalent of deficit deniers. The balance of opinion in peer-reviewed science is clear, however: if we do not address this issue, there will be significant economic costs and impacts for future generations. We must deal with it; we cannot simply close our eyes.

I understand that the Government will make an announcement on the renewables obligation certificates review shortly. I hope we get a significant degree of parity between Scotland and the countries south of Hadrian's wall in respect of ROCs. In my constituency, we have the first commercial-scale wave hub in the country, and I give the previous Government great credit for having invested in it. Although it is based just outside my constituency, the wave hub itself lies within it. It is important that we have measures that encourage such initiatives, so I hope that we have a favourable outcome to the ROCs review.

This has been a constructive debate, and I hope we can take the key issues forward constructively with all parties engaged.

5.51 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): This debate covers the important topics of rising energy prices and their effects. The combination of a sharp rise in energy prices and an economic downturn has resulted in families already feeling the pinch. The coming winter is predicted to be the coldest on record, yet there is no substantive action from the Government. We must challenge that, or many more people will suffer.

I am proud of Labour's record in office on energy issues, and especially on fuel poverty. We ensured that support was focused on the most vulnerable groups. The winter fuel payments were introduced by Labour, and they have helped more than 12.7 million people in 9.2 million households to keep their homes warm. Warm Front was the Government scheme for the fuel poor, and it has helped more than 2 million vulnerable households across England since its inception in 2000. I was very disappointed to learn that the current Government are phasing that programme out, thus ending 30 years of Government-funded programmes. The north-east led the way in many of those endeavours. There were tremendous schemes in my area, Stockton-on-Tees, as well as in Redcar in Cleveland, and in Newcastle and Gateshead. However, as the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) said earlier, fuel poverty levels are still high in our region.

Labour also started the process of energy market reform, which would have opened up the market to new entrants, thus increasing competition and thereby giving consumers greater choice. To ensure that that was not merely an empty gesture, we wanted to back it up with tough legislation to protect consumers from the vested interests of the big six energy companies. However, it

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seems that this Tory-led Government are showing their true colours. They are siding with big business over ordinary people by failing to take on the big six at the very time the country needs them to take decisive action in order to stop many ordinary families plunging into fuel poverty and debt.

Perhaps the Government are ready for action, however. I, too, am delighted that they have decided to accept our motion. It recognises that the forecast of a cold winter and the cuts in Government support will lead to millions of people struggling to heat their homes. The Government accept that tonight, and I hope they are going to do something about it. More importantly, their acceptance of the motion means they agree that we need to break up the dominance of the big six by requiring them to sell power into a pool to allow new entrants into the market. Does the Minister plan to announce tonight that the Government will compel the big six to pool their energy, thus driving down prices?

What are the Government's plans? We need to see people get help with their energy bills—this is such a basic need—so that they are not pushed into financial hardship. I wish to concentrate my remarks on fuel poverty. Lower bills are always the answer. The best way to reduce fuel poverty is to put money in people's pockets, but this is not just about excessive energy prices; it is also about more fundamental issues, such as the poor-quality heating and insulation in too much of the country's housing stock, and low household income.

I know that the energy suppliers have a responsibility to play a substantial part in helping to eradicate fuel poverty through meeting the cost of energy-efficiency measures, but the Government have a tremendous role to play too. Under the last Labour Government, we saw tremendous success for the Warm Front programme and initiatives such as the warm zones, with which I was personally involved. Millions of homes benefited from the schemes, with well-insulated homes and efficient boilers saving individual households hundreds of pounds a year. There was an extra dividend of better health, thanks to people living in warm, dry homes. I well remember taking executives of the then Lattice Board, the parent company of my employer, Transco, now part of the National Grid Company, to visit houses in Thornaby on Tees, in my neighbouring constituency. One resident invited the executives to feel the wall and said, "Its warm, isn't it? It used to be stone cold." We had a warm zone fan there.

Sadly, the Tory-led Government have not seen fit to build effectively on what was achieved under Labour, when the number of people in fuel poverty tumbled from more than 5 million to slightly over 1 million. Since then, the price rises, some of them justified but others doubtful, have meant that that figure has rocketed upwards and we are back to having the disgraceful number we inherited from the Tories in 1997. Yes, we had success, with people in my local Stockton-on-Tees borough council area faring better than most, but still some of the hardest to heat homes with solid walls remain cold, with families and individuals unable to afford their energy bills even before the recent hikes in prices. According to statistics from the Department for Communities and Local Government, more than 1.3 million children are estimated to be living in the coldest, worst-insulated homes. That is truly shameful in 21st century Britain.

The energy companies have obligations to consumers and manage them in different ways, with mixed success, often through no fault of the companies themselves. Many of the schemes require further investment or match funding by the local authority, and failure on its part to find such funding means that the very schemes to improve people's homes and cut their fuel bills simply cannot go ahead. That will occur more in the future as the Government's huge cuts to local authorities restrict their ability to invest in this vital work.

We need to see a change in the Government's proposals to make homes more energy-efficient. We must ensure that the resources the energy companies are compelled to spend on these measures are properly targeted at those in greatest need in the homes hardest to heat, without there being a need for councils, or perhaps housing associations, to find match funding they simply do not have. Energy companies do work hard to try to meet their obligations and some achieve the necessary credits, doing so more efficiently than others by taking advantage of their massive size and buying power. We can all understand their taking that advantage, but perhaps it is time to look at a way in which each company would be responsible for a financial commitment to energy-efficiency schemes, rather than meeting specific energy targets. This is perhaps a personal view, but is there not a case for companies to pay a fixed levy, based on turnover and profitability, directly into an independently managed fund, which would ensure that all that hard cash finds its way to the households that need it most and that we get the best value for money?

MPs should be under no illusion: many ordinary families and pensioners in Britain are facing incredibly tough times at the moment. The toxic combination of rising unemployment, rising food and fuel prices, the increase in VAT and the freezing of wages leads to ordinary people facing a huge struggle just to make ends meet. The cost of a typical dual fuel bill has increased by 48% since 2007, meaning that energy bills are now one of the single biggest outlays a household faces. The latest fuel poverty statistics show that 5.5 million households in the UK cannot afford to heat their homes adequately. It is time to change. The bills need to be cut now and the big six need to become many more.

5.59 pm

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): I will speak as briefly as I can about three issues: unconventional gas, fuel poverty, and what we should be doing about the big six—or, perhaps more pertinently, what we should not be doing.

First, I do that think that unconventional gas is a panacea, but the Government need to take it a little more seriously than they have up to now. There has been a lot of discussion about wholesale gas prices rising and getting bigger and bigger, but that is not wholly true. It is true in Europe but it is not true across the world. In the US, the Henry Hub market for wholesale gas is now 50% of the level that it is in Europe. If we were purchasing gas at that price here, we could cut all fuel bills by one third immediately. That has been achieved by a remarkable technical innovation to do with fracturing and horizontal drilling, which is probably the most significant change in the energy industry in the past two decades. It has not happened here yet and there is some way to go before we can say that it will happen here, but both the industry lobby and, frankly, the green lobby are very suspicious of unconventional gas. In my view, that is why the Government need to take it seriously. The US has been able to generate more energy from gas than from coal, and that has a massive impact on its carbon emissions. The quickest way for anybody to reduce carbon emissions is to replace coal with gas as soon as possible. I would like to see that point taken more seriously, and it is not true that gas prices are increasing everywhere worldwide—they are not.

Secondly, we have heard a lot about fuel poverty and there have been some very powerful speeches, particularly from Opposition Members, on this issue. I have heard the figure that 2,700 deaths are the result of fuel poverty each year. That is a terrible statistic and is one that we all need to take seriously.

We missed the opportunity a decade or perhaps two decades ago to embark on a programme of cheap nuclear power in the way that France did, and frankly we are paying the price for that now. However, I believe that both sides of the House voted for the Climate Change Act 2008. It may well be that we need that Act and that it is the only way forward, but we need to be clear about the implications, because whichever way one looks at its requirements, it puts up the cost of energy. That might be right, but putting up the cost of energy in that way increases fuel poverty at the margin, all other things being equal. We talk about CCS, wind power and solar power, all of which cost more than gas and other methods, and it is very important that we fully understand that they do not come cheaply. We need to be very careful, as we legislate more for targets of 80% reductions by a certain date, that we understand what we are doing.

Finally, I want to talk about the big six. As has rightly been said—I heard it said recently—most of those companies are now foreign owned. The other thing about the big six is that we require them to spend £200 billion in our country in the next 15 years. They can choose whether they do that or not, but if they do not, we will face a bigger problem here than fuel poverty: the lights will go out. Coal stations will be coming off stream in the next three or four years and nuclear is coming to the end of its life. We face a very serious issue here in a way that no other country in Europe does and, as far as I can see, the only way we can deal with that is through massive investment—some of which, perhaps unfortunately, is going to have to come from those people, who are, as has rightly been said, a cartel in some ways. I have heard language today about them; indeed, I think I heard an Opposition Member accuse them of criminal behaviour and of being a cartel that had rigged the market and that should be fined 10% of turnover, which would cost them £10 billion. It is a terrible thing to accuse directors of criminal behaviour. We have no evidence of that and it is not true. We have an oligopoly and we have to manage it.

Luciana Berger: Four of the big six energy companies have admitted that they had been involved in doorstep selling practices that they have now had to stop because they were wrong. They were mis-selling packages on the doorstep which meant that people were paying more for their energy.

David Mowat: Is it the position of the Opposition Front-Bench team that the big six should be fined 10% of turnover? That was the point made from the Opposition Back Benches.

We have also heard words such as "obscene greed". We have to make the market more competitive, and I agree with the motion that it is right that to get new entrants coming in and to make the market more transparent. It is clearly right that we make it much easier to switch between suppliers. I hope the Government make progress on that as quickly as they can.

Eight months ago Government Members voted for a windfall tax on energy companies, including one of the big six. That proposal, which was opposed by almost all Opposition Members, has resulted in fuel prices coming down for motorists, which is part of the mix. I find it a little difficult to take that the Opposition opposed that windfall tax on people who are making more money in terms of return on capital employed than the big six, and now the Opposition say that we are being light on the industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. We have three remaining speakers. The winding-up speeches will start at 6.30, so speeches of just under eight minutes, including interventions, should get everybody in.

6.6 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I will try to keep my comments short. I have listened to the debate and I am seriously concerned. We seem to talking about tinkering with a market that has failed. Let us be straight about it. We are told that for the next 10 years we will be faced with volatile energy prices. Consumers are being ripped off. When privatisation was first mooted in the Chamber nearly 30 years ago, I do not believe that anybody on either side of the argument would have envisaged that we would be faced with the madness of six energy companies holding us to ransom, punitively putting up prices, while the Government stand idly by.

Yesterday I read an article about Centrica, which owns British Gas. Centrica has paid out almost £145 million in shareholder dividends, yet the average dual fuel customer will pay £1,317. I am not singling out British Gas for criticism because, in June and September, all the big six increased their energy prices. All of them are bringing misery and pain to the consumer. When I talk about misery and pain, I understand what it means. I have people coming to see me and saying that last winter, which was the coldest on record, they were sitting in their living rooms with their duffel coats on and going to bed at 8 o'clock at night, fearful that when the utility bill drops on their doorstep, they will not be able to pay it.

Fuel poverty has affected the most vulnerable in society, but it seems that we are at the tipping point where anybody on an average household income could be in fuel poverty. I think of the pensioners living in my constituency, many of them former miners with industrial diseases, who have to keep their houses a little warmer than other people do because of the diseases they suffer from. They are feeling the pain. When I read statistics that tell me that, between 2003 and 2009 in my constituency, Islwyn, there were 41 excess winter deaths, and right across my country, Wales, there were 1,700 winter deaths, I think to myself, "Why, in the

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21st century, are people dying of the cold?" It is like something that we would read in Dickens, yet it is happening now.

What do we get? We get the Prime Minister, in response, inviting the big six energy companies to tea and biscuits at Downing street. Yes, I am sure that a day-long energy summit will fix a cataclysmic failure of the market, which has seen the emergence of a legal cartel, for want of a better word.

Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Is it not the case that over the past 10 years only 50,000-odd customers have been serviced by independent suppliers because the previous Government had so much red tape and regulation in the market? That is why we have the big six and why others are unable to get in.

Chris Evans: I do not agree, and I am sorry but I do not think that that adds to the debate at all. We have to deal with the here and now. The simple fact is that people's lives are at risk because of the profiteering of six energy companies. That is where we are now and it has nothing to do with the past 10 years. People are dying because of a cartel of companies that put profit above people.

What do we do now? We have a problem in this country. The Secretary of State says, "Oh, it's like buying a £20 toaster, or a £40 toaster." It is not like that. If I want to buy a television, I can walk into Currys and the retailer will charge me depending on whether I want an LCD television or a plasma screen. It is not like that in the energy market. Electricity is electricity; there is no luxury version and everyone needs it. How do the electricity companies create competition? They do so by creating tariffs. In some cases there are more than 100 different tariffs. *Which?* magazine has reported that a trained accountant could not understand his own energy bill. What hope do elderly customers or vulnerable families have when trying to work out their energy bills?

We are faced with problems of energy security. It seems to me that we have three options. One option is a windfall tax on the energy companies. It is all very well saying that we should tax the energy companies to the hilt until the pips squeak, to use the words of a former Labour Chancellor, but that would only be a short-term solution to the problem. Judging by how the energy companies are acting at the moment, I fear that they would probably pass the costs of such a tax on to the customer.

The second option, and probably the best one, is to get more entrants into the market. I would like to see energy being sold in banks, in supermarkets, or by any lifestyle company, but the problem is that the barriers to entry are so huge that they cannot get involved. There is an absolute monopoly on the power stations, which are owned by the big six. They can charge whatever they want.

What can the Government do? They have an option. They could create a central electricity body, just as Ofgem suggested in its Project Discovery report, which would mean that there would be a single energy supplier. It could be set up not as a nationalised company, as under the old rules, but as a co-operative, with profits being pumped back into the system to improve infrastructure. These are ideas that we may have to talk about, because eventually we will have to come here and talk about our energy needs, but what can we do in the short term?

One major problem is that Ofgem has no teeth. I do not believe that the big six are particularly worried by warnings from the Competition Commission or inquiries by MPs and Select Committees. They do not care. There have been more than 18 such inquiries since 2001, and what has happened? Energy prices have still increased year on year. We must do something now. Let us give Ofgem real teeth and real powers to punish those energy companies.

I end by saying that we face something extremely serious, and we must pay it serious consideration and ask serious questions. For so many people, such as those in my constituency, it really is a matter of life or death.

6.14 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): What the public want to know, in the context of this debate and elsewhere, is why energy prices keep going up, and why we have the so-called rocket and feathers effect, whereby prices go up when wholesale energy prices go up, but they do not appear to come down when wholesale prices come down. The truth is that, in terms of our knowledge of how these things work, it is difficult to find out why—for the reason, among others, that the market is now so un-transparent and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) just outlined, so concentrated in so few hands.

It is true that the price of wholesale gas has varied over several years between about 70p and 15p a therm, but nevertheless the overall trend is up. Indeed, a recent Deutsche Bank report suggested that notwithstanding shale gas, gas prices will probably double by about 2014. It is true that wholesale prices are going up, but the increase does not bear close relation to the energy company price rises that we have seen. That is the central problem. Some 46% of our generation is by gas, the price has increased by 90% over the past 10 years, and other prices follow gas as the market maker.

All that is based on trading in an energy market that was set up 10 years ago, with 20-odd wholesalers, 20-odd retailers and little vertical integration between them. It was also established at a time of privatisation, when those companies inherited a market in which we were self-sufficient in gas and had a substantial capacity margin in electricity generation plant. Neither is now the case.

Furthermore, the market was created carbon-blind; its purpose was simply to keep trading prices down when there was no vertical integration. It did so for a while, but now we are in entirely different territory. Indeed, six large companies control 99% of the retail market and about 60% of generation, and they have some grid and transmission assets as well.

The power of such vertical integration means that the market that was created 10 years ago simply no longer works. The long-term deals that the companies set up account for almost all energy company trading, they are mostly bilateral and totally un-transparent, and energy companies trade with themselves, so it is difficult to see where the pricing goes and whether it is fair to the consumer.

More and more, the big six also hedge their arrangements on price variables, so they all mirror each other, and the result of a price increase by one is that, inevitably, other companies put up their prices, too. Increasingly, therefore, there is effectively—even if not deliberately—a cartel-type price arrangement.

As for new entrants, they are almost all retail-only, and they have to buy their power from the big six. It is a bit like encouraging corner shops to set up, knowing that they will have to get their stock by shopping at Tesco and then somehow compete with Tesco on price.

There are also still positive Government disincentives for new entrants. Small retailers, for example, are exempt from the recently increased obligation payments for up to 125,000 dual fuel customers. Above that level, however, not only is the company obligated for all levy payments, but all customers are then eligible. In other words, their 125,001st customer costs them £7 million, and on that basis no small niche company in their right mind right now will seek to exceed 125,000 customers. It is a straightforward lock-out disincentive.

Monday's energy summit did not deal with any of those issues. We were exhorted to switch, which is a good idea, but in those circumstances, and for the reasons that I have outlined, it is of only marginal utility. Logically, one cannot keep switching and saving what is claimed—and anyway, some 80% of customers simply do not switch, leaving the big six energy companies with a huge pool of resources to draw upon in order to outcompete those small entrants on retail tariffs.

As we have heard, tariffs are hopelessly confusing. It would not be beyond the wit of the regulator or the Government to introduce mandatory simple tariffs—a standing charge and a tariff per unit used. I personally favour introducing rising block tariffs, which make lower usage levels even less expensive.

Insulation was dealt with at the summit, where it was stated that 4 million people were to get letters saying that they could get insulation free—on the basis that support from the public finances for insulation measures will disappear in 2013, after which there will be the green deal, which will provide the same insulation, but in exchange for a permanent charge on the property. I am not sure that many members of the public would automatically see that as the good deal that some people suggest.

We must deal with the market. The Government have confirmed that electricity market reform proposals are coming forward, but those proposals do not deal with the way that the market actually works. The Government put all sorts of bells and whistles on the back of the proposals—contracts for difference instead of the renewables obligation, capacity payments and so on—but they do not address the central issue of whether the market works for the future, how transparent it is, and whether other ways of trading would be more fit for purpose in this century.

We need a pool system of 100% auctions on all markets, or a single-buyer stakeholder pool. That will ensure transparency and a level playing field for new entrants and, if coupled with an obligation, will ensure an orderly dispatch of energy between wholesaler and retailer. That is not addressed in electricity market reform, but it is addressed in the Opposition's motion. It is good to see that the Government have apparently signed up to the idea that there should be a pool, so I anticipate that they will shortly make amendments to the White Paper on electricity market reform in order to bring about a pool as the centrepiece of a new electricity market system.

We need aggressive policies on energy efficiency and insulation. We currently have no idea how the green deal will work. No funding has been identified, and it may not be available in very large quantities for the energy company obligation. On that basis, there is no real prospect of achieving the levels of insulation that we need, combating fuel poverty or pushing down bills.

Environmental measures do not account for a large proportion of bills. Indeed, last year the previous 6% level fell. The Government are stuck in a dilemma. They want the big six to undertake most of the investment of up to £200 billion in new plant and grid renewal that we will need, but unless those companies make big profits they are unlikely to undertake that investment. However, several of the companies are over-borrowed in any case. We need different sources of money to ensure the reality of a transparent and investable future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The wind-ups are to start no later than 6.30 pm.

6.22 pm

Mr Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): In his opening salvo against the Labour party, the Secretary of State rightly condemned the previous Government's decision to close the Peterhead carbon capture project. Inexplicably, he went on thereafter to pull the plug on the Longannet project, which drives a coach and horses through energy and industrial policy. We have been told for months, if not years, about the prospect of carbon capture and storage producing an export potential, but that will now be lost. After Peterhead was not proceeded with, we lost the lead on gas carbon capture and storage, and the same will happen with the Longannet project. That is a daft decision that will come back to haunt this Government.

Fuel poverty is affecting more and more of our people. A total of 770,000 homes in Scotland are in fuel poverty, and for every 5% rise in energy prices, a further 46,000 move into that situation. The last energy price rise was nearly 20%, which shows the effect that those rises have. That is an utter scandal in an energy-rich nation such as Scotland. Last week Ofgem said that the profit margin for energy firms had risen to £125 per customer per year—up from £15 in June—with the average dual fuel bill now £1,345 per year. And that cannot be considered in isolation. Just as energy bills are rising, so is the cost of road fuel, food and other essentials. This week's inflation figures are a grim reminder of the pressures on family budgets at a time when wages are static, at best. In June I received a written answer about energy price inflation, which showed that in four of the last five years the rise in domestic energy prices had outstripped the rate of inflation, whether we use the retail prices index or the consumer prices index—and that was before the recent round of price hikes.

Last week we had the energy summit. I fully understand the need for energy efficiency, and I support it, but we must be honest and accept that the current rate of price rises far outstrips the ability of the average family to reduce their bills through greater energy efficiency. At best, energy efficiency might mitigate some of the rise.

[Mr Mike Weir]

I will cite my own experience in this area. I pay for my gas by direct debit. I took measures to reduce energy consumption and managed to reduce my gas usage substantially, yet I still found that the gas company wished to increase my direct debit payment. I suspect that many families will face the same situation. I urge Ministers to watch their language when talking about the effect of energy efficiency measures, because the claims that they reduce bills may well turn out to be hollow, and put people off taking the necessary measures. A little honesty would not go amiss.

A similar situation exists with regard to switching. Much has been made of the reduction in the number of people switching. I do not find that particularly surprising, because the pool of potential switchers is bound to be reducing. Again, Ministers have to be much more honest about the effect of switching. It seems to me that unless one is on a particularly bad tariff or using a pre-payment meter, the benefit of switching will not be great. Call me cynical, but I also wonder about the apparent follow-my-leader strategy of the energy companies on price rises. Switching when one's company raises its prices might just mean that one's price rise is slightly delayed, until the new company gets around to doing the same. There is also evidence that many of those who switch end up on a worse deal. In that respect, I welcome the promise of more transparency. That is urgently needed on pricing and tariffs.

Another outcome of the summit was that the 8 million quarterly credit customers were written to, telling them of alternative payment methods. That is all very well, but the truth is that many of them will not want to change, because in difficult financial times many people juggle their bills, delaying the payment of one bill in favour of paying a more pressing one. Such people may not want to pay by direct debit, because they would have no control over when the money left their account.

I strongly support the effort to increase insulation, with the proviso that I have already mentioned about being more up-front about the benefits.

Although many of the factors affecting fuel poverty and energy prices are outwith their control, the Scottish Government are pushing forward with efforts to tackle this problem. As well as holding discussions with the energy companies, they have introduced an energy assistance package worth £33 million, which has helped 150,000 people on low incomes to reduce their energy bills. One in six Scottish homes have been visited for a home energy check, and almost 18,000 installations have been made. The scheme has been extended to help the most vulnerable. In addition to helping pensioners, the scheme now includes the disabled, families with young and disabled children, those with severe disabilities and the terminally ill. It is to be extended next month to people on carer's allowance, which could benefit up to another 7,000 households. Next year the £50 million warm home fund will also be in operation to give additional help to the fuel poor.

That is in stark contrast to what the coalition Government are doing. In his comprehensive spending review, the Chancellor announced cuts of more than two thirds to Warm Front, and over the next three years, responsibility for the assistance package will pass from the Government to the energy companies.

That brings me back to the energy companies. It is easy to paint them as the unrestrained villains of the piece. However, I do have some sympathy with the position that they find themselves in. They are being told to invest in new capacity, and at the same time they are being attacked on prices. The Ofgem report shows the vast amounts that they are making in profits. I recall one particular occasion when I was on the Energy and Climate Change Committee and we had the big six before us. We pressed them on where they made their profits. They managed to deny simultaneously that they were making profits on generation and that they were making profits on selling energy. That prompts the question: where were the profits are coming from? If we are all in this together in these difficult times, as is claimed, we have to recognise that when family incomes are not rising the energy companies have to make their contribution. We have to take action to force them to reduce prices, because asking them to take action does not seem to be working.

In closing, may I ask whoever is winding up for the Opposition to explain one point about energy being pooled? I can understand it in the case of electricity, but I am less sure about how it would work in the case of gas, particularly as so much of our gas is now imported, much of it in the form of liquid petroleum gas. I cannot see how that can possibly be pooled for the benefit of gas customers.

6.30 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to have the chance to close this afternoon's Opposition day debate.

This year, millions of households across our country will face a cold, hard winter. In 12 months energy bills have risen by a fifth, whereas energy companies' profits have increased by 700% in the past few months alone. Across the country, people are struggling to keep their homes warm and the lights on, as their spending power has been squeezed. As we have heard today from many Members on both sides of the House, people are having to choose whether to heat or eat.

After hours of debate today, it is clear that the Government are not taking the action we need to make bills simpler and prices fairer. The debate has shown that there is a real choice between a Government who would rather stand alongside the big energy companies than stand up for the hard-working majority, who cut support for our constituents when they need help most, who walk away when families are struggling with higher food prices and gas bills and worrying about their jobs and their children's futures; and a Labour Opposition who are prepared to make the tough choices, stand up to the powerful vested interests of the closed energy industry, provide real help to people this winter, and take action to reform how our energy market works for the long term.

We heard in the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), for North West Durham (Pat Glass), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Islwyn (Chris Evans) how families and small businesses in their constituencies are finding it very difficult to make ends meet. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) highlighted in his intervention the challenge of energy-intensive industries.

Businesses and households have been hit hard by the highest level of inflation ever, crippled by the Government's rise in VAT and squeezed by energy bill increases. It cannot be right that almost a quarter of all British households now spend 10% or more of their disposable income just to keep warm. Many Members, including the hon. Members for Hexham (Guy Opperman) and for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), also identified the additional cost challenges faced by customers who live off the grid.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (John Robertson) highlighted the real problem of the withdrawal of Government support. The Government are replacing the social tariffs, which provided support for vulnerable consumers, with the warm home discount, from which just one in 20 pensioners will benefit. They are leaving a gaping hole by reducing the Warm Front scheme to a third of its size but putting nothing in its place to support vulnerable people this winter, and they are reducing the winter fuel allowance by up to £100, despite promising before the election not to do so.

My hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull East and for Glasgow North West made the point that according to the interim Hills fuel poverty review, which was released earlier today, there will be 2,700 winter deaths this year as a result of fuel price increases, which is a staggering four people for each of our constituencies. This is a life-or-death issue that transcends political divides.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) talked about the wave hub and the need to encourage renewable generation, and he is hoping for a positive outcome from the ROC review. We are, too. We share the view that if we reform the market and invest now in low-carbon energy generation, we can secure our future energy supply while creating thousands of new jobs. We know that 80% of people currently pay too much for their energy, but who does the Secretary of State blame for that? The energy companies? The bewildering array of more than 400 complex tariffs? No, he blames us, the consumers, for not switching supplier.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that even when people switch, many of them find they are paying more for their tariff than they did before?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I shall cover that point in just a few moments.

There has been an issue with doorstep selling, which four out of the six energy companies have had to stop because it has been proven that people were mis-sold packages and were paying more than double what they were before. We know from last week's Which? report that a third of people are not offered the best advice from their energy suppliers when they call them for advice about which tariff to switch to.

On Monday, we heard and saw all the news about the energy summit and thought that that was a great opportunity. The Government could have done something tangible to help, but all we got was more of the same. We were told to shop around, ring this number and look at that website. I looked at the DECC website to see what the exact outcome of the summit was, and it tells us:

> "This winter suppliers will place a cheaper tariff signpost message on the front page of bills, encouraging customers to call their supplier or visit a website to find out if they could be saving money on their energy bills."

We already know that many people do not have access to the internet or to websites and cannot benefit from cheaper tariffs because they do not have access to a bank account or because they are unable to secure direct debits, an issue that specifically affects pensioners. We already know that that approach does not work, but the energy summit had no outcome on simpler tariffs, improving trust, reforming the market or increasing competition. It showed an out-of-touch Government wedded to an out-of-date orthodoxy at the expense of everyone else.

In her opening speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) set out a very clear plan to limit energy cost increases and to support struggling households.

Chris Huhne: The hon. Lady mentions the clear plan from the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), but will she clarify for the benefit of the House whether it is now Labour policy to break up the big six, as the leader of the Labour party suggested, or to have a Competition Commission referral? May we have some clarification?

Luciana Berger: The Leader of the Opposition has said that we are seeking to break the dominance of the big six. He has not explicitly said that he wants to break them up—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We must have interventions from the Dispatch Box. It is no good the Secretary of State chuntering from a sedentary position in the faint expectation of being heard.

Luciana Berger: The point of the debate is that we are trying to get action from the Government now, this winter. We have not seen anything from the Government that will help my constituents and those of all hon. Members. Anyway, as I shall say later, we are very grateful for the Government's support for our motion.

First, we believe that we need an immediate investigation into mis-selling by energy companies and compensation for consumers who have been ripped off. For too many years, cold-call doorstep sales have led to hundreds of thousands of people paying more for their energy after switching to a worse deal. As I said only a moment ago, the news that four of the big six have ended that abusive practice is welcome, but questions remain about selling methods. We want an immediate investigation with proper sanctions to restore trust. The Secretary of State said before that there will be compensation for anyone ripped off in the future, but we are concerned about the thousands of people who have already been affected.

Secondly, the energy companies should use their ballooning profits to help families and businesses struggling to make ends meet by cutting their bills now. Last week, Ofgem published research showing that the average dual fuel bill is now a mammoth £1,345 per household, but at the same time energy companies have seen their profits soar, with their margin now standing at a whopping £125 per customer, up £110 in just four months. It is

[Luciana Berger]

wrong that energy companies are raising their profits by 700% when consumers are being told that bill increases are unavoidable.

Thirdly, the Opposition believe that we need transparency, meaning that companies need to be clear and open about how much it costs them to buy their energy. Only then can customers be clear that they are getting a fair deal.

Fourthly, we want simple tariffs. We need tariffs that are fair to consumers, but that are also easy to understand and compare. Something is wrong when 70% of consumers say that they find the number of tariffs on offer confusing. A daily standing charge covering the cost of delivering energy to people's houses and a unit price so that people can see clearly how much they are paying would mean an end to confusing charges, making it easier for them to compare suppliers' prices properly.

Finally and most importantly, we need reform of our energy market, which for too long has been dominated by a handful of companies. At one time that seemed to be working, but no longer. It is clear that those vested interests are looking after themselves handsomely, while their customers struggle. As Ofgem has shown, and as many Members said this afternoon, as soon as the wholesale price goes up, so do people's bills; but when wholesale prices come down, bills do not follow.

The market is broken and we need to fix it. We want all generators to sell all their power on a long-term market to any supplier. By reforming the market in that way and by opening it up, new entrants can join, increasing competition and lowering bills.

We also need action on securing our future energy supply, which means taking tough decisions now. Investing in low-carbon energy generation will create thousands of new jobs and drive our economy. However, under this Government, sadly, we are going backwards.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: I hear a lot of talk about the energy companies and recognise that we want to be critical friends. Does the hon. Lady think that they are producers or predators?

Luciana Berger: The point is that we want responsible business, which is what this debate is all about.

The challenge currently is that the Government are creating uncertainty for investors by playing political games with climate change. The Opposition do not believe that that will grow our economy. Talking down the green economy might sound good to a Conservative party conference, but what does it say to the companies that want to put their money behind carbon capture and storage or those that want to invest in renewables? What does it say to the small business owner who is thinking of providing energy-efficient goods or the manufacturer that is planning to build parts for a new generation of wind farms or solar panels? To them, talking down the green economy says: "Think again."

We have a choice: we can be a leader or a follower. The jobs, investment and prosperity can come here, or they can go elsewhere. We want Britain to be a world leader, but for that to happen, we need a Government who get it. We have seen today that this Government do not get it.

For households in the squeezed middle, for vulnerable people and for millions of small businesses who need lower bills, now is the time to take action. Now is the time to make pricing transparent, to simplify tariffs, to tackle mis-selling, to demand that the energy companies use their profits to help to reduce energy bills this winter, and to reform the energy market. I urge hon. Members to take that action today, and I am delighted that the House supports Labour's motion.

6.43 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): I am delighted to have the chance to respond to what has been, broadly, an excellent, high-quality and wide-ranging debate. Some contributions were perhaps overly political, but for the most part they were thoughtful. That reflects the genuine concern on both sides of the House, and the fact that in every single part of the country, people are worried about fuel prices this Christmas and this winter. They want the Government and the Opposition to work together as effectively as possible to try to deal with those issues.

That is why we have said that we will not oppose the motion—I could happily have written much of it myself. The motion states that the energy market is in urgent need of reform. That is why we ignored the Labour party's claim before the election that there was no case for reform and have started the most wide-ranging reform process of the past 20 years.

The motion refers to concerns about Ofgem's study into prices and margins. We encouraged Ofgem to carry out that work, and it was under this Government, not the previous Government, that it was started. The motion states that

> "energy tariffs are confusing and unfair".

Everyone who has spoken in this debate has talked about the difficulty of switching suppliers owing to the complexity of the system. That is an issue on which we really want to see progress. It also calls on us "to investigate mis-selling". We are putting that right, although it would have been within the gift of the previous Administration to have addressed it—but they did not take that opportunity. The motion asks that we apply a simple format to tariffs so that people can compare them easily. Again, that is work that we are taking forward through Ofgem.

Mr Watts *rose—*

Charles Hendry: The hon. Gentleman popped in 10 minutes ago, while others have been here for five and a half hours, so I shall not give way to him.

The motion calls for the publication of trading data, but Ofgem, under this Government, have now engaged forensic accountants to untangle the accounts of the big six. It also refers to breaking the dominance of the big six, but it is this Government who have started to facilitate the process by which smaller companies can enter the market and by which power generation can be auctioned off by the major companies. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) asked whether the Government were going to stand alongside the big six. I think that we have shown, through our actions, that we are prepared to tackle the abuses that were there when the leader of the Labour party was Energy Secretary, and we have decided to move things forward.

The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) talked about the energy summit. I hope that, on reflection, people will realise that the messages from that summit are important to our constituents. No one is pretending that they are the full answer or the long-term answer, but all our constituents would be well-advised, in the run-up to this winter, to consider what they can do themselves to mitigate high prices. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has never said that consumers should be blamed for current high prices, but he has said that there are things that we can all do and which we should be doing. Ridiculing that, as she did, might be good politics, but it does not help her constituents. If the alternative that she is suggesting is that they should not check their bills—my right hon. Friend has said how valuable that has been—consider switching or insulate, under her suggestion, her constituents would suffer this winter.

Caroline Flint: The Opposition are certainly not suggesting that people should not try to get the best deal. The problem is, as has been amplified today, that they cannot find the best deal when they try. The Secretary of State said in his opening speech—if I heard correctly—that the letters that people receive will tell customers what is the cheapest deal for them. Will they get that specific information or will they just be asked to ring a number to check?

Charles Hendry: It will be a combination. That information will be on their bills if it is believed that they could be on a cheaper tariff. We advocated such a measure while in opposition, but it was rejected by the then Government. Also, letters specifically suggesting that someone would benefit from changing will be sent to them when the company believes that they could be on a lower tariff.

In addition, we need to focus on the economic realities. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), to whom I respond with the fondness with which he spoke himself, said that he was going to be political, but actually gave one of the most balanced and effective speeches of the debate. He talked about the role of the big six and the fact that we need them for the country's future electricity and energy security. He and his constituents will know how important the two German companies, RWE and E.ON, are to the building of a new power station. He was right to say that this debate was not about whether we are pro-business and anti-consumer or anti-business and pro-consumer. We need those energy companies to invest in the future of energy generation in this country if prices are not to go through the roof because of insufficient supply.

My hon. Friends the Members for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and for Warrington South (David Mowat) drew attention to the massive challenge and the £110 billion that has to be invested this decade in our future energy infrastructure if we are to keep the lights on. The existing energy companies are part of that process. There need to be others, but we cannot achieve that if we drive away the existing players.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (John Robertson), who spoke with his usual sincerity on a theme that is familiar to him, almost implied that we would be better off without those companies. However, if we drive them out, who will invest in the nuclear plants that he wants? It will be international companies that choose to make those investments, but if he says that they are not welcome here, the nuclear renaissance that he and I both want simply will not happen. If we reach a point where supply does not meet demand, the first thing that will happen is that prices will go up. His constituents in Scotland—as well as those of the hon. Members for Ynys Môn and for Islwyn (Chris Evans) in Wales—will be the worst affected by that, because they are the ones who use the most electricity, as they are often at home, owing to the conditions that he spoke about, in the coldest climates in our country. They are the people we must bear in mind for the longer term if we want to address the problem properly and effectively.

We have looked at the profits that the companies are making compared with their profits globally. Their profits in the United Kingdom are often a small part of their overall profitability. We need those investors to play a bigger role, just as we need more companies coming forward.

Dr Whitehead *rose—*

Charles Hendry: I will give way if there is time later, but I want to respond to all the points that have been made.

At the end of a year when we have seen the worst nuclear incident for decades, the worst oil and gas incident and unrest in the middle east, where so much of our oil and gas comes from, it was inevitable that there would be upward pressure on prices. Looking ahead to next winter, the wholesale gas price is 40% more than it was last year, and gas makes up 40% of our generation, which makes a knock-on consequence inevitable. In the face of those global pressures, we should focus on how we—the Government, Parliament, industry, consumer groups and individual Members—can ensure that we support our constituents through this period.

I do not say this to make a political point, but we should recognise that there is a legacy issue that needs to be picked up as well. We need to secure investment in this decade at twice the rate of the last decade. We have to play catch-up, and the market reform process, which was put off for too long, now needs to be addressed. We have acted to prevent consumers from being affected by price increases that would otherwise have happened. The carbon capture and storage levy was going to be included in people's bills; we have taken it off, saving them an equivalent of £1 billion over time. The previous Administration's renewable heat incentive would have added an estimated £179 to annual bills by 2020, but we have removed it to ensure that we cut the impact on consumers, while the tough decision that we took on feed-in tariffs will save consumers £3.5 billion to 2020. The Labour party could not have been stronger in opposing that, but we believed that it was right to be on the side of consumers rather than wealthy investors. In the renewable obligation banding review, which we will publish shortly, we will show how we want to use those resources most efficiently and effectively to introduce the low-carbon economy that we want to see.

There has been criticism of the level of green charges—the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) was one of the people who raised that—but it is sensible to put them in context. Some £20 of a typical gas bill of £600 relates to green or environmental charges, whereas £41 in an electricity bill of £500 relates to environmental charges—well under 10%—with a further £19 relating

[Charles Hendry]

to energy efficiency programmes in the homes of some of the poorest in our communities, which is work that we should all support. In total, therefore, we are talking not about the figure of £200 that we read in the press—we have challenged the media to say why they have quoted that figure—but about £80 in a bill of £120, which is not the real reason why energy prices are being driven up. We have said clearly that we will look carefully at how those moneys are allocated to ensure that we deliver the best possible growth outcome in this country.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) talked about standing charges and rising block tariffs, which the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) also picked up. My concern is that switching the system would not just penalise people in the largest houses, but would hit the people who, because of circumstances beyond their control, are the major energy users. They are people who are older and at home more, and who need more warmth in the winter. They are people who have disabilities and perhaps cannot get out. They might be large families, perhaps on low incomes, or people who are out of work. In making the kinds of change that the right hon. Gentleman advocates, we would have to be very careful that they did not have a perverse consequence, and that the people who, through no fault of their own, have to use more energy—particularly heat—would not be adversely affected in the process. We will look at the ideas that he has put forward, but we need to be aware of the potential consequences.

We could have made progress on this matter earlier. My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) called for greater transparency in energy bills. In the 2010 Energy Bill, we tabled new clause 4 on that subject, but it was voted down by the Labour Government. The kind of information that we will now require, proposals for which we are asking Ofgem to take forward, would have been addressed more effectively if that provision had been adopted. We tried even earlier, when we tabled new clause 4 to the 2008 Energy Bill. That dealt with environmental charges and clarity in bills, but it was voted down by the then Government.

We have heard many contributions on energy efficiency. That, too, is an area in which we could have made greater progress. We proposed the green deal in an amendment to the 2010 Energy Bill, but it was blocked by the Labour Government. We could have had 18 months more progress on insulation, on dealing with energy efficiency and on taking a long-term perspective on these issues, rather than trying to deal with them on a small-scale basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) was absolutely right to highlight the important role that the warm home discount will play, and the help that it will provide. He was also right about the need to speed up the process on smart meters. We pushed for that in the 2010 Energy Bill, and I have been pushing for it since 2006. Only now are we in a position to try to take some of those measures further forward. In all those areas, we are making up for lost time.

Albert Owen: Will the Minister give way?

Charles Hendry: I will not give way, as I have several other points that I want to make, including some on the hon. Gentleman's concerns about off-grid consumers. He said that he would like us to meet up and talk about the issues, and I would like him and my hon. Friends the Members for Hexham (Guy Opperman), for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and for St Ives, and others, to talk to me about how we should take this work forward. Important work has been done by the Office of Fair Trading, and we need to look at how to take that further. The issue that was raised about differential pricing and price on delivery has been addressed, and the OFT has said that it will continue to look at examples of market abuse.

I want to see what more we can do to develop the gas grid, because that would be of real benefit to the constituents of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn. I also want to see what additional powers would need to be taken, and where. The OFT's report suggests that the market is working in almost all parts of the country, but we need to be certain, as our constituents face very high bills over the coming months, that we are doing this in the most appropriate way.

The role of shale gas was mentioned, but that issue will not affect energy pricing this winter. It is too early to know whether it will be a game-changer in the United Kingdom, but it could have a significant role to play. I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Steve Baker) that it would be unwise to bet the farm on shale gas, unless his farm happened to be in north America and sitting on top of a shale gas deposit. However, we look forward to these technologies and the contributions that they can make as we will take forward a wide-ranging, all-embracing energy policy.

There has been a legacy of neglect. There has been a failure to secure the necessary investment in new energy infrastructure, and to address fuel poverty, which rose from 2.4 million to 3 million households over the course of the last Labour Government. There has been a failure to give consumers the clarity that they want, and to facilitate an effective changing regime, but that is now being put right. There has been an absolute failure to grip the challenges of energy efficiency. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree said that, for too long, those issues had not been addressed, and she was right. For too long, they were not addressed, but we have now taken forward many of the measures that the motion calls for—

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question put accordingly and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that the energy market does not serve the public interest and is in need of urgent reform; notes with concern research by OFGEM showing that average household energy bills have risen, while energy companies' profit margins have soared; recognises that, with a cold winter forecast and Government support cut, millions of families will struggle to heat their homes; believes that energy tariffs are confusing and unfair, meaning that 80 per cent. of people currently pay more for their energy than they need to, and that consumers who try to switch are often given inaccurate information; further believes that to tackle climate change, build a new low carbon economy and make the UK a world leader in green energy, which will bring new industry and jobs to the UK, people need to know that the energy market is fair; and calls on the Government to investigate mis-selling and ensure consumers are compensated, introduce a simple format to be applied across all tariffs, so that people can compare the full range of energy deals at a glance, increase transparency by requiring energy companies to publish their trading data, reform the energy market to break the dominance of the Big Six by requiring them to sell power into a pool, allowing new businesses to enter the market, increasing competition and driving down energy bills for families and businesses, and demand that energy companies use their profits to help reduce energy bills this winter.

ARMED FORCES BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 10 January and 14 June 2011 (Armed Forces Bill (Programme) and Armed Forces Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

1. Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today's sitting.

Subsequent stages

2. Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

3. The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—*(Jeremy Wright.)*

Question agreed to.

Armed Forces Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 2

ARMED FORCES COVENANT REPORT

7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Andrew Robathan): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 2 to 5.

Mr Robathan: This group of amendments deals with the armed forces covenant report. Amendment 1 reflects the concerns in the other place about what some considered to be an unfortunate juxtaposition that would result from inserting the armed forces covenant report clause in the Armed Forces Act 2006 directly after section 359, which deals with pardons for soldiers executed during the first world war. This Lords amendment, which the Government accept, will have the effect of moving the clause to a different position in new part 16A to the Armed Forces Act 2006, and the new part will be entitled "Armed Forces Covenant Report". So, for the future, the covenant report will have its own part within the legislation. I commend this change to the House.

Lords amendment 2 deals with inquests. It responds to the views expressed in this House and in the other place about the desirability of including the operation of inquests in the list of topics to be covered in the armed forces covenant report. It addresses an issue that is close to the heart of many right hon. and hon. Members. Our intention has always been that, when the Defence Secretary prepares the annual report, he should have regard to the whole range of subjects within the scope of the armed forces covenant, including the operation of the inquest system for bereaved service families.

We have listened very carefully to the concerns expressed in both Houses and we have decided to accept the amendment. In so doing, I wish to put on record our understanding of what the amendment envisages. The effects of service that the Defence Secretary could cover as a result of this amendment could encompass a wide range of inquests for both veterans and serving personnel. In accordance with his understanding of what the amendment envisages, the Defence Secretary will exercise the same discretion on this topic as on the other mandated topics—namely, he will consider which groups of service people and which aspects of the operation of inquests it is appropriate to cover in his report.

Quarterly ministerial statements on military inquests are already provided to Parliament; indeed, they have been since 2006. They are accompanied by detailed tables outlining progress in conducting an inquest for each fatality resulting from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the wide range of potential issues, our expectation is that in current circumstances the annual report will focus on similar matters to those covered in the quarterly statements. Our understanding of what the amendment envisages is that it is intended to be broad, but that there are matters that should not be covered in the annual report.

Members are well aware that inquests and coroners are independent of Government. In so far as the Government provide a legislative framework for inquests,

[Mr Robathan]

this is a matter for the Ministry of Justice, so I wish to make it clear that the Defence Secretary will not report on matters concerning the general operation of the inquest system, but only on those that affect service people.

It is clearly essential that investigations into the deaths of service personnel are treated equally in the annual report, regardless of where they are held in the UK. So, where appropriate, the Defence Secretary will under his general powers under this clause report on matters relating to the operation in Scotland of fatal accident inquiries into the deaths of service people. Inquests are a crucial part of how we support those who died in the service of their country. This amendment emphasises the debt we owe to the members of our armed forces who have given their lives and to their families. I urge the House to agree to it.

I deal now with the three Government amendments 3 to 5. These relate to the involvement of other Government Departments and the devolved Administrations in the preparation of the annual report. The fact that there are three separate amendments simply reflects the advice that the proposed new section of the Act was becoming too long and should be split up. It has no other significance.

During the Bill's passage much attention has been paid to the relationship between the Secretary of State for Defence, who will be responsible for laying the annual report before Parliament, and the Ministers and Departments responsible for delivering many of the services discussed in that report. The annual report will of course be on behalf of the United Kingdom Government as a whole. However, the Government have responded to concerns expressed in both Houses, and the amendments introduce a framework enabling Parliament to be absolutely clear about who is contributing what to the report.

The Defence Secretary will in future be under an obligation to obtain the views of the relevant Departments on the matters covered in the report, and to seek those of the relevant devolved Administrations. That difference in emphasis reflects the different constitutional position. We are working with the devolved Administrations on the covenant, not imposing new duties on them. The Defence Secretary will be required to set out those views in full, or to obtain the Department's agreement to any summary of their views. If the devolved Administrations have not contributed to part of the report, the report will make that clear.

I also draw the House's attention to a number of undertakings given in another place on 4 October by my noble Friend Lord Astor of Hever on how the annual report will be prepared. In particular, the Government have made a commitment to consult the covenant reference group at an early stage on the issues that will be addressed in the report. The amendments, together with those commitments, underline our determination that the preparation of the annual report should be an inclusive and transparent process, so that Parliament can rely on its highlighting the key issue of the day. I commend them to the House.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 5 agreed to.

After Clause 23

COMMONWEALTH MEDALS

Mr Robathan: I beg to move, that this House disagrees with Lords amendment 6.

The amendment inserts a new clause in the Bill which would permit members of the armed forces and Crown servants who are, or who have been, awarded Commonwealth medals to wear them without restriction. The debates in another place on the subject of medals leave no doubt about the emotions surrounding this important issue. The amendment raises questions about the process and rules for deciding on the acceptance and wearing of awards given by foreign and Commonwealth nations, about the position within that process of Her Majesty the Queen, and about recognising and supporting the Commonwealth.

The Government's position on the fundamentals of how the system should work remains the same as that of the last Government, who, I remind the House, were in office when the issue of the Pingat Jasa Malaysia medal was considered. It has been held by every previous Government since King George VI established the current system. The Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals—the HD committee—was set up to advise the sovereign on all issues relating to honours, decorations and medals. It consists of senior Crown servants from the Departments most involved. Where relevant, the views of service Chiefs of Staff are fed in and reflected in the advice given to the sovereign.

The thinking behind this approach is straightforward. When British citizens, whether civilian or military, carry out their duty to the sovereign and to their country, it is for the sovereign to decide on the award of honours for that service. That allows us to be consistent in our response to all foreign or Commonwealth states. It prevents a situation in which, if other states were free to honour UK citizens as they chose, there might be suggestions of patronage or influence. It also means that the advice given to the sovereign about the grant of honours is consistent across Government and, as far as possible, dispassionate. Decisions on whether to reward service should not be made in the glare of public or political debate. I do not pretend that absolute consistency has been, or always can be, maintained. Sometimes exceptions have been, and no doubt will be, made. This amendment would lay down for the future a new rule about medals: that those awarded a Commonwealth medal shall be entitled in all circumstances to wear it. However, it would also apply that rule to Commonwealth medals awarded in the past, including the PJM medal.

I do not wish to dwell today on the issues surrounding the PJM or any other specific medal. The Government will remain engaged with the Lords, who have argued strongly that the present arrangements for the PJM are not right. I recommend that the House should disagree with amendment 6 as this is not an appropriate matter for legislation.

The amendment overturns past decisions made on Commonwealth medals. In doing so, it establishes the precedent that Parliament may overturn—after any length of time—any decision of the sovereign as the fount of honour. It takes away from the sovereign—and, indeed, from the United Kingdom—any control over the acceptance of Commonwealth medals in the future. It is drafted in terms which apply whenever a Commonwealth country chooses to honour members of the armed forces, veterans or other Crown servants, even if that was against the wishes of our armed forces or, indeed, the sovereign. More generally, it establishes a further precedent that Parliament can lay down and change the rules which are to be applied to decisions on the acceptance of honours. It does away with the safeguards I have mentioned, such as the need for a basically consistent approach to awards by all friendly and allied states. It takes us to a system where decisions on the award of past, present and future honours are made in the party political environment of parliamentary consideration, rather than through the largely non-political approach set up by King George VI. I believe this is wrong in principle.

In addition, the amendment would create a different principle for the wearing of medals awarded by Commonwealth nations from that which applies to those awarded by other allies. The operations in which our armed forces are involved are increasingly international, with British units working alongside United Nations, NATO or European Union partners. We could not readily explain to non-Commonwealth allies, and especially to the individuals they wish to reward, why we treat their awards on a fundamentally different basis from those offered by a Commonwealth nation. Making a distinction of this kind is not the way to reflect our respect for the Commonwealth.

No system is perfect. As my noble Friend Lord Astor has stated in another place, officials have been instructed to look at the process by which advice about the institution of medals and the acceptance of foreign awards for military service is put together, considered and submitted to Her Majesty, and at how decisions are promulgated. They will then consider whether any advice should be given to Her Majesty about the need to review the process and make changes. We aim to conclude this work before the end of the year.

Lord Astor also said that, in the light of the continued strength of feeling about the PJM, we would put in hand representations to the HD committee to reconsider the position. That is the right way to handle such matters. The wrong way is for Parliament to overturn Her Majesty's decisions and to establish a precedent for Parliament to lay down new rules. In particular, we should not make a rule which removes all further involvement of Her Majesty and the United Kingdom from decisions on Commonwealth awards.

These awards should be made in a measured, dispassionate and independent manner away from the glare of public debate. I urge the House to disagree with the amendment.

Paul Murphy (Torfaen) (Lab): I will not detain the House for long. The Minister said party politics should not be involved in the granting of awards and honours, particularly those from Commonwealth countries. I entirely agree, and I think he will agree that this amendment is intended not necessarily to change the law on these issues, but rather to bring attention to the situation with regard to the PJM medal. Our constituents have great difficulty understanding why these veterans, who are probably in their 60s and 70s and who have been awarded this medal by Malaysia, can receive it but cannot wear it. The approach is strange and very inconsistent. The Minister has said that there has not been complete consistency in the past on how these medals and awards are dealt with. I do not think for a second that a precedent would be broken here, because precedents have already been broken on who can and cannot wear particular medals.

7.15 pm

It is also incongruous that the Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders who fought in Malaya in the 1960s and 1970s can wear the medals but our British veterans cannot. They fought the same battles and the same war, and they deserve the same recognition. One assumes that the Queen's Governments in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere advised Her Majesty that it would be possible for this particular medal to be worn. Indeed, I am informed that the last Governor-General of Australia was a recipient of the PJM medal and was allowed by his own Government, on the advice he must have given to the Queen, to wear that medal. It is incongruous, is it not, that the former Governor-General of Australia can wear the medal but somebody in my constituency who fought in Malaya in the '60s cannot?

I am grateful that the Minister indicated that the Government would look again at the issue of the PJM medal.

Mr Robathan: The right hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent case for reviewing the entire system, and we are currently carrying out a medals review. I assure him that it is a genuine review, not a—*[Interruption.]* Not one as conducted by the Government of whom the right hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Mr Murphy) was a member.

Paul Murphy: The Minister has already indicated that both Governments did not really resolve this issue. The previous Government examined it carefully. Lord Touhig, the then Member for Islwyn, raised it on a number of occasions, both by way of an Adjournment debate and elsewhere, but he got nowhere with the Government of whom I had been a member. Nevertheless, it is important that the Minister understands the huge strength of feeling on this issue up and down the country. This is not about taking away the powers of the sovereign and it is not about the prerogative; it is about dealing with the simple issue that veterans who fought in Malaya in the 1960s should be allowed to wear the medal which they have been allowed to accept.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I rise briefly to echo many of the remarks made by the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Paul Murphy). A significant number of my constituents cannot understand why they are not being allowed to wear the PJM medal. They are puzzled as they believe it to be a genuine medal, and it was gazetted as such in the *London Gazette* in the 1960s. I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I am persuaded by the Minister's statement that he intends to examine the procedure by which these things are decided. I agree with him that the Lords amendment may not be the right way to address this problem. I am therefore persuaded to support the Government in voting against the Lords amendment, on the understanding that he will indeed carry out a genuine reconsideration of the process. By that means, he may well help my constituents who are puzzled by the law that says they cannot currently wear the PJM medal.

Gemma Doyle (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the opportunity to discuss this amendment, and I am very disappointed that the Government are objecting to it. Lord Craig of Radley made a strong case for his amendment in the other place, supported by Lord Ramsbotham and Lord Touhig, arguing that our veterans and service personnel should be permitted to wear Commonwealth medals that have been awarded to them. It is very humbling to talk to service personnel and veterans about the experiences that have led to the awarding of a medal, and they should have the right to wear proudly the medals that they have earned.

I support the need for the awarding of medals to be fully considered by the cross-departmental Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals, but we cannot continue to have anomalies such as veterans being awarded a medal but not being given the right to wear it. This amendment therefore seeks to address the specific issue in relation to the Pingat Jasa Malaysia medal.

Mr Robathan: I know that—*[Interruption.]* Actually, I think it is quite gentlemanly. The hon. Lady cannot be held responsible for the actions of the previous Government because although she may have supported them, she was not in the House, but sitting next to her is someone who was doing my job not 18 months ago—the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). This was not a matter of any concern to him then.

Gemma Doyle: That is not an argument for not acting this evening. If the Minister will allow me to make a little progress, he will understand why we are supporting the amendment this evening. I have no desire to upset royal prerogative, and I respect traditions and conventions, but I did not come into Parliament to accept the status quo meekly—I stood for Parliament to challenge conventions that institutionalise unfairnesses such as this. As we have heard this evening, many Members in the House have recognised and acknowledged that unfairness in their support for holders of the PJM.

Colleagues on both sides of the House, some of whom have now moved to the other place, have campaigned on this issue for many years. I think that in the beginning they would have accepted the response that this was a matter for the HD committee, but now, after years of politely asking the committee to reconsider this matter, Parliament must stand up and take a lead. There cannot be many Members here who have not been contacted by a holder of the PJM who would dearly love to wear their medal. My constituent Moira Murray from Dumbarton, who served in the RAF and travelled to Malaysia to collect her medal, visited me during the summer to say how proud she would be to wear it. Moira is joined by thousands of other brave British veterans who served in Malaysia in the 1950s and '60s who have been awarded the PJM by the grateful Malaysian nation, which was keen to recognise their contribution, but the HD committee decided that they should be allowed to accept it but not to wear it.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Gemma Doyle: I will give way, but I hope this is going to be a different point to the one that has already been made.

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way but she really cannot get away with her synthetic outrage. During 13 years of her party's Administration nothing ever happened on this. Will she at least give credit to this Administration for setting up a fundamental review of honours and decorations through the appropriate committee?

Gemma Doyle: I am not making party political points and this is not synthetic outrage—indeed, it is not outrage. I am putting forward quite a rational case for supporting the amendment that the Lords have put forward.

What kind of message does this send to our brave service people—"Go abroad for your active service, risk your life for others, sacrifice so much for your country and for the grateful people of another and be awarded a medal but not the right to wear it"? PJM holders might be able to accept this arrangement but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Paul Murphy) has already indicated, the medal has been awarded to veterans from other Commonwealth countries who took part in the conflict, and they do have the right to wear it, unlike their British colleagues who served alongside them. Australian and New Zealand veterans are allowed to wear their medals, but British veterans are not. Given that they are all subject to the same sovereign, the Minister must be able to understand why this is perceived as unfair and anomalous.

I have written to the Minister on this matter previously and he referred, as he has this evening, to previous consideration and decisions by the HD committee. He also explained why medal holders in other countries can wear the PJM:

> "Each Government applies its own rules and judgement to its own citizens and no country is obligated to follow another. This applies to medals as it applies to other aspects of public policy."

In that case, I urge him not to hide behind royal prerogative but to take his own advice and take a Government decision. It would be helpful if he could clarify whether the discussions on medals are the ultimate responsibility of the Government, as he indicated in that letter, meaning that the Government could indeed press ahead with change, or whether it is an issue of royal prerogative, in which case it simply does not make sense to have different rules for the same medal for different countries of the Commonwealth as they are all subject to the same sovereign.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): When I was awarded the Order of Merit, officer class, by the President of the Republic of Poland, I received, without any solicitation, a letter from Buckingham palace signed by Her Majesty's representative saying that I could wear the Order of Merit, officer class, of the Republic of Poland anywhere in the United Kingdom. Does my hon. Friend agree that it seems a little unfair that former members of the Royal Green Jackets regiment in my constituency cannot wear the medals that they earned in conflict whereas I, without asking, have been given permission to wear the OM, officer class, of the Republic of Poland?

Mr Speaker: Order. The distinguished career history of the hon. Gentleman will be of continuing interest and indeed fascination, but I know that in responding, the hon. Lady will wish to remain in order.

Gemma Doyle: Indeed. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) has highlighted why so many veterans feel that the decision is unfair.

The wearing of the PJM has been raised in the House in the past, both in Adjournment debates and in several early-day motions calling for reform of the HD committee system or requesting that the Government make representations to the committee to bring about change and ensure that veterans have the right to wear their medal. Signatories of the early-day motion included the familiar names of the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff), the present Under-Secretary of State for Defence, and the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey), now the Minister for the Armed Forces, who are not on the Treasury Bench at present, but frequently are when the House debates defence issues.

The hon. Member for North Devon also signed a motion specifically calling for an exemption and noting the differences with other Commonwealth nations. Given the Ministers' previous support for PJM holders, I hope it is not too much to ask them, along with the other 51 Government Members who have signed early-day motions supporting PJM holders, to support the Lords amendment today. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State is chuntering from a sedentary position, but I advise him to listen to the argument being made today.

Concerns have been expressed about the precedent that the amendment could set, but we must remember that it seeks to address a very specific set of circumstances—that veterans be allowed to wear a Commonwealth medal that they have earned, been awarded and been permitted to accept.

Members may be aware, however, that the Government have faced similar situations in the past. The Russian convoy 40th anniversary medal was awarded to British veterans in 1985, after negotiations between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Russia. Like the PJM, although veterans were able to receive it, they were not allowed to wear it until 1994 when, after further negotiations and lobbying, veterans were given permission to proudly display their commendations. Ministers talk about precedent, but it seems that a precedent already exists that would permit the wearing of the PJM.

I do not suggest that we start using legislation routinely as a vehicle for decisions on medals, but in this instance it is clear that Members feel that the process is not working. My office receives frequent inquiries from people who are not constituents of mine but are entirely frustrated by the medals system and the lack of information about the review, in which the Minister places so much faith.

Mr Gray *rose—*

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con) *rose—*

Gemma Doyle: I am not giving way at the moment. I know that the Minister had to re-open the consultation on the medals review as the proper consultees were not initially involved.

Mr Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I am amazed that she shows no tint of political embarrassment about the blatant political opportunism of promising now to do something that her Government refused to do for 13 years. Will she not be satisfied with the fact that my right hon. Friend the Minister announced that there will be a review of the PJM, which is an important point? The Lords amendment is not about the PJM; it is about all Commonwealth medals. Surely she can understand that those of us who feel strongly about the PJM on behalf of constituents should be satisfied with the fact that the Government are prepared to review it—something that her party was never prepared to do.

Gemma Doyle: The hon. Gentleman is making a somewhat better case than the Minister made. As he supports the principle of the amendment, I hope he might reconsider and join us in the Lobby this evening.

In conclusion, I welcome the strengthening of the armed forces covenant in the Bill. It offers veterans, as well as service personnel and families, the protections that they deserve. Supporting the amendment would be an indication of the approach that the Government intend to take in moving forward in the spirit of the new legislation on the armed forces covenant.

7.30 pm

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): Before addressing Lords amendment 6, I wish to join colleagues in paying tribute to the men and women of our armed forces, wherever they serve, and expressing gratitude for their hard work, bravery and courage.

I agree with the Minister. The Liberal Democrats will be disagreeing with our friends in another place on this matter. We need a full and thorough review of all the issues associated with the awarding of Commonwealth medals. It is pernicious for the Opposition to pick one medal and try to make political capital out of it, rather than looking at the matter overall. However, I say to the Minister that this will be the second review that the coalition Government have had on the awarding of medals. It is important that this time we learn from the failure of the previous review to secure cross-party support and get it right for the long term. The terms of reference and the timeline for the last review were not made public and it failed to consult interested stakeholder groups, including the veterans to whom the medals are awarded. I ask him to give an assurance that those three concerns will be resolved in the new review.

Mr Robathan: We have since consulted specifically on each issue and await the approval, or otherwise, of the medals review, but I am afraid that it has not yet been approved.

Stephen Gilbert: I thank the Minister for his intervention.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I must remind the hon. Gentleman that his party backed this campaign when in opposition. It also campaigned very strongly for the national defence medal, including some very nasty leaflets from a Liberal Democrat candidate directed against the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

Stephen Gilbert: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. The Liberal Democrats support the national defence medal and a thorough review that will deliver consistency for the awarding of all medals for members of our armed forces. It is absolutely right that for people joining our armed forces it is as much a calling for them as it is a job. It is right that we give them the recognition

[Stephen Gilbert]

they deserve for their bravery in standing up for our freedoms. It is absolute hypocrisy for a former Minister sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, who was chuntering under his breath and saying that the reason they changed their view—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that no allegation of hypocrisy against an individual hon. or right hon. Member should be made. I feel sure that he is not imputing such motives, but if he is perhaps he would withdraw his remark.

Stephen Gilbert: If that is what the record shows, Mr. Speaker, I of course withdraw the remark.

There is a level of disingenuity, shall we say, in a party that had 13 years to act on this issue but failed to do so now seeking to make political capital from it. It is important that we get this right for all the men and women who serve in our armed forces and that we do so in a considered way. That is why we disagree with the Lords tonight.

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not know whether the Minister is seeking to respond to the debate. No? He is not obliged to, as the Government have set out their position.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 6.

The House divided: Ayes 263, Noes 216.

Division No. 370] **[7.33pm**

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Andrew, Stuart
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Norman
Baker, Steve
Baldry, Tony
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Bingham, Andrew
Birtwistle, Gordon
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Mr Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Bray, Angie
Brazier, Mr Julian
Brine, Mr Steve
Brooke, Annette
Bruce, Fiona
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Buckland, Mr Robert
Burley, Mr Aidan
Burns, Conor
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, Lorely
Byles, Dan
Cairns, Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Clappison, Mr James
Clark, rh Greg
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colvile, Oliver
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Crockart, Mike
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, David T. C.
 (Monmouth)
Davies, Philip
de Bois, Nick
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dorrell, rh Mr Stephen
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Jonathan
Evennett, Mr David
Fallon, Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr Mark
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freer, Mike
Fullbrook, Lorraine
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Mr Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gilbert, Stephen
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, Robert
Hames, Duncan
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Matthew
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Harvey, Nick
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, Mr John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Mr David
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoban, Mr Mark
Hollingbery, George
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, Mr Gerald
Howell, John
Hurd, Mr Nick
James, Margot
Javid, Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kelly, Chris
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Mr Greg
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Laws, rh Mr David
Lee, Jessica
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leech, Mr John
Lefroy, Jeremy
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Luff, Peter
Lumley, Karen
Macleod, Mary
Main, Mrs Anne
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Esther
Mensch, Louise
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Patrick
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Anne
Moore, rh Michael
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Mosley, Stephen
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr Brooks
Newton, Sarah
Nuttall, Mr David
O'Brien, Mr Stephen
Offord, Mr Matthew
Ollerenshaw, Eric
Opperman, Guy
Ottaway, Richard
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mike
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pugh, John
Raab, Mr Dominic
Randall, rh Mr John
Reckless, Mark
Rees-Mogg, Jacob
Reid, Mr Alan
Robathan, rh Mr Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Amber
Ruffley, Mr David
Russell, Bob
Rutley, David
Sanders, Mr Adrian
Sandys, Laura
Scott, Mr Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok

Shelbrooke, Alec
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr Keith
Smith, Miss Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Soubry, Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mr Mark
Stanley, rh Sir John
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, Mel
Stunell, Andrew
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Teather, Sarah
Timpson, Mr Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Truss, Elizabeth
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Uppal, Paul
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Ward, Mr David
Watkinson, Angela
Weatherley, Mike
Webb, Steve
Wharton, James
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Mr Mark
Williamson, Gavin
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wright, Simon
Yeo, Mr Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mark Hunter and
Jeremy Wright

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bain, Mr William
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barron, rh Mr Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Dame Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blomfield, Paul
Blunkett, rh Mr David
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Brown, Mr Russell
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Campbell, Mr Alan
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Mrs Jenny
Clark, Katy
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curran, Margaret
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Mr Wayne
Davidson, Mr Ian
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Denham, rh Mr John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Docherty, Thomas
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donohoe, Mr Brian H.
Doran, Mr Frank
Dowd, Jim
Doyle, Gemma
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Engel, Natascha
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr Frank
Fiello, Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Gardiner, Barry
Gilmore, Sheila
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mrs Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Greatrex, Tom
Green, Kate
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Mr Tom
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heyes, David
Hillier, Meg
Hilling, Julie
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hood, Mr Jim
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs Siân C.
Jamieson, Cathy
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Joyce, Eric
Kendall, Liz
Khan, rh Sadiq
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Long, Naomi
Love, Mr Andrew
Lucas, Ian
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
MacShane, rh Mr Denis
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Marsden, Mr Gordon
McCann, Mr Michael
McCarthy, Kerry
McClymont, Gregg
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs Anne
McKechin, Ann
McKenzie, Mr Iain
McKinnell, Catherine
Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Morden, Jessica
Morrice, Graeme *(Livingston)*
Morris, Grahame M. *(Easington)*
Mudie, Mr George
Munn, Meg
Murphy, rh Mr Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Nash, Pamela
Onwurah, Chi
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Percy, Andrew
Perkins, Toby
Pound, Stephen
Raynsford, rh Mr Nick
Reed, Mr Jamie
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Roy, Mr Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, rh Joan
Seabeck, Alison
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Shuker, Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Mr Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walley, Joan
Watts, Mr Dave
Weir, Mr Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodcock, John
Woodward, rh Mr Shaun
Wright, David
Wright, Mr Iain

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr David Hamilton and
Tom Blenkinsop

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 6 disagreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 6;

That Mr Andrew Robathan, Mr Mark Francois, Gemma Doyle, Mr David Hamilton and Stephen Gilbert be Members of the Committee;

That Mr Andrew Robathan be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—*(James Duddridge.)*

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The media are reporting that the House business for next week has been changed, and that the Backbench Business Committee debate on a European Union referendum Bill is now to be not on Thursday but on Monday. First there is the issue of the media being told first, rather than the House, but secondly, that is Back-Bench business time. Although the Government can allocate that time, they cannot dictate to the Backbench Business Committee what business is done on what particular day. This seems to be a breach of the orders of the House, and I wonder whether you have had any indication that a statement will be made to explain the situation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Have you been informed by Her Majesty's Government that, if the business for Monday is to be changed, the designation of the European Union business will change from Back-Bench business to business of Her Majesty's Government?

You will well remember, Mr Deputy Speaker, that last week Her Majesty's Government went to great lengths to protect the Hillsborough debate, which was scheduled as a result of an e-petition. The debate on an EU referendum is also in response to a public petition, but the Government's response seems to be at odds with their previous behaviour.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I find that there is always speculation about Government business, but as the House knows, there is to be a business statement as usual tomorrow, at which the Government will set out the business for next week. That is solely a matter for the Government and not one for the Chair.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

That the draft Freedom of Information (Designation as Public Authorities) Order 2011, which was laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.—*(James Duddridge.)*

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That the Order of the House of 6 September 2011 relating to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee be amended, in paragraph (1), by leaving out the words "re-balancing the economy in Northern Ireland" and inserting the words "applying the principles of the Big Society Agenda to Northern Ireland".—*(James Duddridge.)*

PETITIONS

Prisoners' Rights in Israel

7.52 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): It gives me pleasure to present a petition on the issue of the illegal detention without charge of many in the Palestinian community, notwithstanding the Egyptian-brokered deal that has seen the welcome release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and good progress on the release of Palestinian detainees. The petition is from Elizabeth Morley and the Free Palestine group in my constituency.

The petition states:

The Petition of the people of Ceredigion,

Declares that the Petitioners are appalled by Israel's continued illegal detention without charge of thousands of Palestinians, including hundreds of children, women and sick people, held in inhumane conditions, in violation of their basic human rights.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take every possible measure to ensure that Israel complies with all its international legal obligations in this regard, particularly the Fourth Geneva convention.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000966]

Train Fares in West Kent and East Sussex

7.53 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am very glad to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) in his place. I know that were it not for the constraints on him as a Minister, he would be joining in the presentation of this petition with his customary enthusiasm and determination.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of West Kent and East Sussex,

Declares that the Petitioners note the campaign by the Kent and Sussex Courier on Southeastern rail fares and that the Petitioners believe that local rail travellers have been unfairly targeted by double figure fare increases, above the average across the network.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review its policy on the setting of rail fares.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000967]

For the thousands of rail travellers in west Kent and on the three lines to London through my constituency—the Borough Green and West Malling line, the Tonbridge line and the Edenbridge line—the extortionate increase in rail fares that they face is a matter of huge importance. I am glad of the opportunity to present this petition.

Train Fares in West Kent and East Sussex

7.55 pm

Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I, too, present a petition that is also strongly supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) on behalf of the residents of west Kent and East Sussex, who are calling one last time for Southeastern rail not to increase rail fares so far above the rate of inflation. The petition is supported by more than 2,000 people and I hope that even now Southeastern will think again.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of West Kent and East Sussex,

Declares that the Petitioners note the campaign by the Kent and Sussex Courier on Southeastern rail fares and that the Petitioners believe that local rail travellers have been unfairly targeted by double figure fare increases, above the average across the network.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review its policy on the setting of rail fares.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000968]

Car Insurance (Northern Ireland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(James Duddridge.)*

7.55 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I am pleased to have secured this debate on an issue that severely impacts on my constituents and others across Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is here to respond to the debate.

There are considerable problems in the motor insurance market at present, especially in Northern Ireland, where drivers are subject to excessively high insurance costs that are rising rapidly year on year. The problems are not unique to Northern Ireland, but they are particularly striking in our case. We have also found in our research that consumers in Northern Ireland have less choice of insurance providers, with three times fewer companies offering car insurance.

I also welcome the introduction of the Motor Insurance Regulation Bill, promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw). My right hon. Friend, quite rightly, shone a light on troublesome referral practices and the Bill promises to make much-needed changes to the regulation of the insurance market in England and Wales. Although referrals operate in a different manner in Northern Ireland, the purpose of my speech this evening is to cast light and call for action on many of the issues that plague the operation of the car insurance industry in Northern Ireland. These issues are not entirely commensurate with those raised by my right hon. Friend in relation to England, but must be dealt with in the same direct and purposeful manner. I call on the Minister, where possible, to ensure that that is the case and to use his good influence to press the Northern Ireland Executive to act on the issue.

In August the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland launched a campaign to highlight the cost of car insurance, which I fully support. The Minister will no doubt be aware that the Office of Fair Trading subsequently agreed to undertake an investigation into the car insurance market with a specific focus on Northern Ireland. We must robustly establish why premiums have increased by a reported 40% in the 12 months to March 2011, and why insurance costs are significantly higher in Northern Ireland than in other regions. Indeed, we need not only to assess that, but to redress it. The findings must be robust and the resulting measures must have teeth.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on introducing this debate on an issue that is very important to us all in Northern Ireland. The concern about the insurance premiums is clear, and one reason for those insurance premiums, and the difference in price between Northern Ireland and the UK mainland, is the Compensation Act 2006. Is the hon. Lady aware that in the past year the number of claims notified to the compensation recovery unit in Northern Ireland fell by 23%, whereas in England and Wales it rose by 17%? Is she also aware that last year some 30,000 claims for compensation were made, but that in the past year only 768 were made and their value in the county court is less than £5,000—far below the equivalent figure in England and Wales? Does she feel that, for those reasons alone,

[Jim Shannon]

insurance premiums in Northern Ireland should be reduced? It is quite obvious that the drivers and vehicle users in Northern Ireland are being disadvantaged financially.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. That intervention was a tad long, Mr Shannon.

Ms Ritchie: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his rather long intervention. I none the less agree with him, and I will come to that point later in my speech.

The extent of the problem is stark. The Consumer Council report, "The Cost of Insurance in Northern Ireland", published in March 2009, indicated that consumers in Northern Ireland were paying 84% more on average than those in the rest of the UK. Furthermore, five Northern Irish cities ranked among the top 10 most expensive areas in the UK. Relatively expensive car insurance premiums prevail throughout Northern Ireland.

Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and I appreciate the fact that she has brought this matter to the Floor of the House. Does she agree that the OFT investigation is crucial, because although the Consumer Council report is useful in highlighting particular issues, it is flawed in a number of respects? For example, it compared median rather than best available prices in the UK. It also compared only products available on comparison websites, which is restrictive when we consider the wider available market.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Like her, I believe that the OFT report is vital in making critical recommendations that I hope will result in the lowering of insurance premiums. I hope that the report has the teeth to deal with this difficult and vexatious issue.

According to evidence, car insurance premiums in Northern Ireland have increased by almost 73% in the past two years. The situation is even worse for younger drivers, whose premiums, according to research, have increased by 112%. Young people face severe difficulties in entering the job market, and the prohibitively high cost of motor insurance is yet another barrier to their finding work.

The average yearly car insurance premium in Northern Ireland is now £923.90, compared with the national average of £525. I am concerned that that, with the increasing cost of fuel, will force some people off the road altogether, or that it will lead to an increase in motorists driving illegally without insurance. I am sure the Minister agrees that we must ensure that that does not happen.

Those problems are compounded by the restricted range of companies offering premiums in Northern Ireland, which limits competition and drives up prices. I urge the Minister to address, and where possible to remove, any barriers to companies that wish to enter the market in Northern Ireland.

Two fundamental arguments are put forward to justify the high costs of motor insurance in Northern Ireland. The first argument is that Northern Ireland is a case apart, because its demographics and road layouts bring an increased risk of incidents on our roads, and the second is that the Northern Ireland legal system places a higher burden on insurers.

To begin with, the evidence that Northern Ireland has a very young population is greatly exaggerated. Indeed, we have a proportion of young people similar to that found in English regions such as London. Likewise, a lack of motorway coverage has been cited as a reason for increased premiums, because statistically those are the safest road type. However, maps show that Northern Ireland has a relatively consistent motorway density compared with regions in the UK and Europe. Moreover, some of the fundamental actuarial evidence regarding the number of accidents, claims and casualties on our highways weighs against any of the debatable factors regarding demographics or road layout.

Those facts must be kept at the forefront of our mind when considering the claimed justification for the increased cost of premiums. They are rising at a time when Northern Ireland is experiencing a decline in the number of road traffic accidents: 2010—the most recent year on record—saw the lowest number of road deaths since records began in 1931. Naturally, every death on our roads is a tragedy, but we must commend the work done to improve safety.

There are some basic facts that are hard to reconcile with rising insurance costs. The number of road traffic accidents reported to the police service has dropped over the past decade from nearly 40,000 per year in 2000 to about 30,000 per year in 2009. The number of compensation claims is decreasing, whereas in England and Wales the numbers are rising. More specifically, according to a National Audit Office report published at the beginning of the year, the number of claims reported to the compensation recovery unit fell by 23% in the decade up to 2009. In short, the trend is clear: although accidents and claims are decreasing, the cost of insurance is increasing. I ask the Minister to give detailed consideration to that fundamental point.

Naomi Long: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way a second time. Does she accept that one of the factors cited was the higher compensation paid out in Northern Ireland, which was attributed largely to the fact that juries have been involved in such decisions for much longer than in England and Wales? Critically, however, compensation levels did not increase but insurance premiums did, so it cannot be argued that that was what led to increased premiums.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for her useful intervention.

All those facts weigh heavily against any argument that the specific demographic or topographical factors in Northern Ireland justify the increasing costs of insurance, and are extremely difficult to relate to the draconian rise in the cost of insurance premiums.

It has also been suggested, by the Association of British Insurers and others, that the legal system in Northern Ireland imposes increased costs on insurers. However, when compared with what happens in England and Wales, many of the factors in Northern Ireland would be expected to act in the opposite direction. My right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn rightly highlighted the impact of referral fees on insurance premiums in England. It must be noted that a statutory prohibition is in force against solicitors paying referral fees in Northern Ireland. Given that the payment of referral fees to claims management companies has frequently been cited as a significant contributory factor to increasing premiums in England, its absence would be expected to drive down the costs of insurance in Northern Ireland. However, that does not appear to be the case.

I am certainly not claiming that the system in operation is perfect. Indeed, although referral fees are prohibited for solicitors, other agents, such as brokers, credit hire companies and repair garages, may receive them. Although credit hire companies offer a useful service for non-blame drivers, they also raise the cost for insurers, and we must have firm regulations to remove the potential for the exploitation of accidents or those involved in collisions. The claims advice service is an important step in doing that, and should be commended. Another factor cited as a reason for increasing insurance prices in England is the practice of "no win, no fee". Such a regime does not operate in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the fact that any claimant would have to invest their own money, or else find a solicitor willing to fund the costs, is a powerful disincentive against speculative claimants.

Jim Shannon: I shall be very quick with this intervention, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does the hon. Lady think that specific consideration needs to be given to social need and the fact that Northern Ireland is clearly, as we all know, a rural community? There are special circumstances in Northern Ireland. Does she think that those should be considered as well?

Ms Ritchie: I take on board what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—my neighbouring constituency—has said. Like him, I represent a rural constituency and am well aware of issues such as a lack of jobs, inaccessibility, and the economic burden on people. All those can place increasing burdens on people at a time when insurance premiums are increasing.

All that, taken together with the absence of referral fees for solicitors, suggests that Northern Ireland offers a legal system that should act to keep costs down and be at least as effective as the system in England and Wales, if not more so. I would like the Minister to note my concern that that is certainly not reflected in the cost of insurance. I accept that the cost of claims for minor injuries in Northern Ireland can be higher than in England and Wales, partially as a result of there being no recourse to the small claims court for such cases, but opening up the small claims court to such cases is not necessarily the remedy, as that will bring its own risks and problems. However, more needs to be done to ensure that spurious and over-inflated claims do not clog up the system and raise costs for honest motorists. We must increase the burden of medical evidence that is required before establishing cases of whiplash or other, similar injuries, not to penalise the vulnerable—those with genuine, medically verifiable injuries would in no way be affected—but to ensure that the police and medical authorities work together so that claims are paid only in cases involving genuine accidents and genuine injuries.

I have dealt at length with the figures and the legal issues, but behind the wealth of statistics are the everyday problems that the high cost of insurance represents. Those living on low incomes or in rural areas can simply no longer afford to keep a car on the road. Many young motorists and their parents in my constituency have told me of their struggles to secure affordable insurance. They are understandably concerned about the discrepancy in insurance prices between Northern Ireland and other regions in Britain. Through having to pay excessive insurance fees, households in Northern Ireland are being discriminated against. That unfair practice has been in place for too long, adversely affecting those, young and old, who depend on their cars for work, particularly in areas where public transport provision is limited.

The broader context is that the economy is suffering, with record numbers of young people out of work, and that is only exacerbated by restricting people's use of motor vehicles. We need a dynamic, mobile work force, but making the cost of car insurance so expensive puts up a barrier to our economic success, especially for the young, among whom the unemployment rate is estimated at 18%—almost one in five cannot find a job—compared with an overall unemployment rate in Northern Ireland of 7.6%. Excessive insurance premiums adversely affect young people, preventing them from offering the skill of driving to potential employers. In these extremely challenging economic times, I would ask the Minister to consider any measures that would make insurance more affordable for young people, particularly when driving relates to their employment.

Insurance costs have a real impact on people, young and old, who need to be mobile for social and economic reasons. I hope that I have made clear the scale of the problem faced by our motorists. The insurance industry must stabilise its premiums so that hard-pressed motorists get a fair deal when they purchase their vehicle insurance. I seek assurances from the Minister that he recognises the problem and will act in unison with ministerial colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive to address the problem in the light of any recommendations from the upcoming Office of Fair Trading report.

Day in, day out, my Northern Ireland colleagues and I face constituents who come to us about the rising cost of car insurance. I heard it again today when I participated in a BBC Northern Ireland debate. There were numerous calls from young people, as well as middle-aged to elderly people, all complaining about the lack of competition and the lack of insurance companies offering different insurance rates. However, the most abiding comments that I heard were about how people wanted insurance costs driven down so that they could drive their cars and access the employment market.

I thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, and look forward to the Minister's response.

8.14 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Mark Hoban): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) on securing the debate. The increased cost of motor insurance has been one of the recurring themes in my postbag since I became a Minister, and those communications have gathered momentum in recent months. The matter affects all parts of the country. It also affects all age groups, but particularly young drivers. At a time when people feel that their cost of living is under pressure, it is important to ensure that

[Mr Mark Hoban]

the motor insurance market works in such a way as to help consumers and that it tries, whenever possible, to keep the cost of insurance as low as possible.

According to calculations from the Association of British Insurers, motor insurance premiums in 2010 amounted to £10.7 billion, and claims amounted to £10.3 billion. When the other costs of the motor insurance business were taken into account, however, that translated to an underwriting loss of £1.8 billion. The cost of motor insurance to the insurance companies themselves, therefore, is quite significant, and it is loss making. There are clearly some real challenges involved, and we need to think carefully about how we can bring down the costs for insurers, so that that can feed through to the costs for drivers. That is what we are trying to focus on.

The Government firmly believe that businesses and consumers get the best outcomes from financial services if markets are competitive and properly regulated. At the same time, disproportionate or overbearing regulation imposes costs on firms that are passed on to users, either through higher charges and lower returns or through a reduction in choice and competition. Our challenge is to strike the right balance.

It is clear that, on average, motorists faced significant increases in their premiums in the year ending 31 March 2011. That is adding substantially to the costs of motoring in the UK. The hon. Lady was right to say that we need to establish the full facts and the reasons behind any increase, and to ascertain whether there are any consumer or competition issues that need to be addressed in order to improve the functioning of the market.

The Office of Fair Trading therefore issued a call for evidence in September. The OFT is asking insurers and others for their views on a number of aspects of the private motor insurance market that might raise competition or consumer issues. This is an important piece of work; it will improve the OFT's understanding of the market and put it in a better position to determine whether there are aspects of the market that are not functioning well and how best to address the issues.

The OFT has been actively engaging with participants in the insurance market, trade bodies, the Government, regulatory agencies and consumer groups by issuing information requests. The research that the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland has done will be helpful in informing that process, and it is to its credit that it has carried out that work. I would encourage people to think about any evidence that they can provide. The deadline for written responses to the OFT's call for evidence closed last week, but it is still open to contributions, and I am sure that it would welcome ongoing input and views. It plans to publish its findings in December this year, and will consider next steps in the light of evidence that it receives.

The hon. Lady focused on the cost of motor insurance in Northern Ireland, and talked about some of the factors that affect it. A research paper on the same issue has been prepared for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It strikes a slightly different note from that of the hon. Lady. It states that

> "the relatively high rate of accidents and related casualties in Northern Ireland, combined with higher compensation levels and legal fees suggests that insurers do, in fact, face considerably higher costs when transacting car insurance in Northern Ireland."

The paper goes on to say that

> "the higher car insurance premium rates paid by Northern Ireland drivers might be reflective of higher risks and costs associated with transacting car insurance business here, rather than a discriminatory pricing regime."

It is interesting to note that, having looked at the cost of motor insurance, the research paper goes on to look at the cost of house insurance, and to compare Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom. There is clearly a debate to be had about the costs, and the evidence provided by the Consumer Council contrasts with that in the research paper produced by the Assembly. That is why I think it is important for the OFT to look at those particular areas and to understand the reasons why premiums in Northern Ireland might be higher than those in the rest of the UK.

Underpinning the pricing of insurers is the use of risk-based premiums. Insurers take a number of different factors into account when deciding the level of premiums and those factors correlate with the risk being covered. For example, some insurers group postal code areas in order to ensure that all those in a similar risk area are covered in a similar way, but the level of data used in underwriting is a commercial decision for firms, which the Government do not seek to control.

While a postcode does not itself determine whether or not a person will make a claim, it can be an accurate indicator of the likelihood. It is often used in cases where there are hotspots for crash fraud. The three worst hotspots are not in Northern Ireland, but where fraud is used to trigger claims, driving up costs for insurers, those costs are, sadly, borne by all those who drive.

There are other issues. For example, the Government were very disappointed with the recent European Court of Justice ruling that the use of gender as a risk factor by insurers should not result in individual differences in premiums and benefits for men and women. We expect this to have a negative impact on consumers and lead to price rises for motor insurance for young women drivers who are seen to be a safer risk than young male drivers.

What we need to do is to tackle some of the underlying causes of costs for insurers. The hon. Lady was eloquent in identifying some of the reductions in road traffic accidents. She is right to point out that it is incongruous to see road traffic accidents falling in number when motor insurance claims are rising. There is an issue there, and we need to get to the bottom of it.

We are committed to the implementation of the Jackson proposals, including the reform of conditional fee arrangements and a ban on referral fees, which we believe will reduce the risk of frivolous claims. Clearly, as justice is a devolved matter, different arrangements are in place as between the mainland and Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady is right that we need to work with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive to look at where there are differences in the legal regime that could be dealt with to help reduce the cost of claims.

We are looking at introducing a statutory ban on referral fees for England and Wales. Since 2004, when the Law Society lifted the ban for solicitors in England and Wales paying referral fees, people have been encouraged to make claims. That has led to personal injury claims rising at a time when the number of collisions and casualties on the road is falling, yet the number and overall cost of bodily injury claims has steadily increased. The hon. Lady spoke about whiplash claims earlier. It is estimated that they cost insurers about £2 billion each year—a cost borne, of course, by those who pay their motor insurance premiums.

As I have said, we are trying to tackle the issue of the payment of fees in England and Wales, but the prohibition remains in place in Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady mentioned that other people might also pay referral fees. The Assembly and the Executive need to think carefully about how to strengthen the current ban on referral fees in legislation. The hon. Lady should take that up with her colleagues.

Other issues drive up the costs of insurance. The hon. Lady talked about the number of young people who want to drive to work or to college to study. What is happening is that they are in part being priced out of the market, but uninsured driving adds about £30 to each insurance premium. We want to ensure that young people take out the insurance cover that they need to enable them to get to college, while tackling the number of young people who are not taking out insurance cover as a means of driving down the cost of insurance.

In conclusion, the hon. Lady has raised an important point. It is a complex issue, as her speech set out. We want to work with the OFT and with the Assembly and Executive to find ways to reduce the cost of motor insurance in Northern Ireland as well as throughout the UK. The OFT report is an important part of that. We want to work with stakeholders so that we get the right outcome to drive those costs down so that people can use their cars for leisure, education and work without paying through the nose for that privilege.

Question put and agreed to.

8.24 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

ADJOURNMENT OF THE HOUSE (NOVEMBER 2011, CHRISTMAS AND FEBRUARY 2012)

That this House, at its rising on Tuesday 15 November 2011, do adjourn till Monday 21 November 2011; at its rising on Tuesday 20 December 2011, do adjourn till Tuesday 10 January 2012; and at its rising on Thursday 9 February 2012, do adjourn till Monday 20 February 2012.

The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 95.

Division No. 369]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Aldous, Peter
Alexander, rh Danny
Andrew, Stuart
Arbuthnot, rh Mr James
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baldry, Tony
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Bingham, Andrew
Binley, Mr Brian
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Mr Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Bray, Angie
Brazier, Mr Julian
Brine, Mr Steve
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Bruce, Fiona
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Buckland, Mr Robert
Burley, Mr Aidan
Burns, Conor
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, Lorely
Byles, Dan
Cable, rh Vince
Cairns, Alun
Cameron, rh Mr David
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cash, Mr William
Caton, Martin
Clappison, Mr James
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Colvile, Oliver
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, Stephen
Crockart, Mike
Crouch, Tracey
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Tony
Davey, Mr Edward
David, Mr Wayne
Davies, Glyn
de Bois, Nick
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty, Thomas
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Edwards, Jonathan
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Chris
Evans, Graham
Evans, Jonathan
Evennett, Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Mr Frank
Field, Mr Mark
Fovargue, Yvonne
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fullbrook, Lorraine
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Mr Roger
Garnier, Mr Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Glindon, Mrs Mary
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, Robert
Hames, Duncan
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Matthew
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Harvey, Nick
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Mr David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Damian
Hollingbery, George
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Horwood, Martin
Howell, John
Huhne, rh Chris
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Huppert, Dr Julian
Jackson, Glenda
James, Margot
Jarvis, Dan
Javid, Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kelly, Chris
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Mr Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mark
Lansley, rh Mr Andrew
Latham, Pauline
Lavery, Ian
Laws, rh Mr David
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Jessica
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leech, Mr John
Leigh, Mr Edward
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Llwyd, rh Mr Elfyn
Long, Naomi
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lumley, Karen
Macleod, Mary
MacShane, rh Mr Denis
Main, Mrs Anne
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McKechin, Ann
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Esther
Mearns, Ian
Mensch, Louise
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Patrick
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Andrew
Miller, Maria
Mills, Nigel
Moore, rh Michael
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, Nicky
Morrice, Graeme *(Livingston)*
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Mosley, Stephen
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr Brooks
Newton, Sarah
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
O'Brien, Mr Stephen
Offord, Mr Matthew
Ollerenshaw, Eric
Osborne, rh Mr George
Ottaway, Richard
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mike
Perkins, Toby
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Pickles, rh Mr Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, John
Raab, Mr Dominic
Randall, rh Mr John
Reckless, Mark
Redwood, rh Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Jacob
Reevell, Simon
Reid, Mr Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, rh Mr Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Amber
Ruffley, Mr David
Rutley, David
Sanders, Mr Adrian
Sandys, Laura
Scott, Mr Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris

Smith, Angela
Smith, Miss Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Sir Robert
Spencer, Mr Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Mr Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sturdy, Julian
Swales, Ian
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Tapsell, rh Sir Peter
Timpson, Mr Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Truss, Elizabeth
Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Uppal, Paul
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Watkinson, Angela
Weatherley, Mike
Webb, Steve
Wharton, James
Wheeler, Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Mr Mark
Williams, Roger
Williamson, Gavin
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr Rob
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wright, Jeremy
Wright, Simon
Young, rh Sir George

NOES

Anderson, Mr David
Austin, Ian
Baker, Steve
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blunkett, rh Mr David
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Creagh, Mary
Danczuk, Simon
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Philip
Dobbin, Jim
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Doyle, Gemma
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Engel, Natascha
Esterson, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flynn, Paul
Gilmore, Sheila
Glass, Pat
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Greenwood, Lilian
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Mr David
Hanson, rh Mr David
Healey, rh John
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hood, Mr Jim
Hosie, Stewart
Johnson, Diana
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, rh Sadiq
Lazarowicz, Mark
Love, Mr Andrew
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mann, John
McCann, Mr Michael
McCarthy, Kerry
McCrea, Dr William
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
Meale, Sir Alan
Munn, Meg
Murphy, rh Mr Jim
Murray, Ian
Nash, Pamela
O'Donnell, Fiona
Paisley, Ian
Pound, Stephen
Raynsford, rh Mr Nick
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Roy, Mr Frank
Russell, Bob
Sarwar, Anas
Seabeck, Alison
Shannon, Jim
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shepherd, Mr Richard
Sheridan, Jim
Shuker, Gavin
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Mr Andy
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Mr Andrew
Turner, Karl
Walley, Joan
Watts, Mr Dave
Weir, Mr Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilson, Sammy
Wishart, Pete
Wright, David

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 20 October 2011

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Onshore Wind Power

1. **Chris Heaton-Harris** (Daventry) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of subsidies for onshore wind power on the levels of energy bills for consumers; and if he will make a statement. [75582]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): Before I begin, I should like to offer my apologies on behalf of the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Gregory Barker), who is unable to attend owing to pressing engagements in Cape Town. As Minister of State with responsibility for climate change, he is deputising for me at a vital meeting in advance of this year's United Nations framework convention on climate change negotiations so that I can be here today.

Support for onshore wind through the renewables obligation is estimated to add £5 to £6 to an average household annual electricity bill of £585 in 2011. The Government recognise the need to protect hard-pressed consumers and are committed to driving down the costs of renewables, as well as realising the economic growth and new jobs that renewables projects bring.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. He is well aware that the level of subsidy granted drives the siting of wind turbines, not their efficiency, and that this drives price, meaning that consumer bills for energy produced from these things are higher than they should be. What plans does he have to amend this subsidy regime?

Chris Huhne: We have today announced the latest consultation on the renewables obligation. That reduces by 10% the renewables obligation certificates available for onshore wind, reflecting the fact that there have been further technological improvements that mean that the costs of this technology are coming down. I realise that my hon. Friend has a long-standing interest in this, but I caution him, particularly given his experience in the European Parliament, to recognise that under the renewables target for 2020, which is EU law, we are committed to meeting 15% of our energy from renewable sources. Onshore wind turbines are one of the cheapest renewable sources, so the fewer onshore wind turbines we have, the more expensive renewable sources we need to have instead. That is a very important factor for him to bear in mind.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that subsidy is not just for wind power but for other forms of carbon reduction, which are incredibly important to all our constituents, not just for their energy bills but for their personal efforts to reduce carbon consumption. What is the Secretary of State's view of the report on the front page of today's *Financial Times*, which suggests that he is completely pulling the rug from underneath thousands of people up and down this country who might have taken steps to invest in solar power for their own houses and who are now finding that their investment is being completely undermined by his decisions?

Chris Huhne: There is no question of anybody's investment being undermined by any of our decisions, because this Government—in this respect, I think we are no different from previous Governments—are very committed to not having retrospection in legislation and legislative changes. However, we keep all our subsidies under review. I just told the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) that we are cutting subsidies for onshore wind turbines by 10%, and that reflects what is going on in the real world. I recently visited a project run with the city council in Birmingham, where people were able to show me invoices from solar panel suppliers showing that they had managed to get a 33% reduction in the cost of solar panels in just one year. It is absolutely right that the Department goes on looking at the appropriate levels of subsidies to bring on these important technologies, and that is obviously what we will do.

Off-grid Households

2. **Dr Thérèse Coffey** (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): What progress he is making on ensuring that off-grid households have access to affordable heating fuels in the winter of 2011-12. [75583]

12. **Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): What progress he is making on ensuring that off-grid households have access to affordable heating fuels in the winter of 2011-12. [75595]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): On Tuesday, the Office of Fair Trading published its study of the off-grid energy market, which found that action is needed to protect heating oil consumers in some areas. Ahead of next winter, the Department has been working with industry and consumer groups in a national campaign to encourage customers to order early and ensure they are well prepared for winter. We have also reminded terminal operators to ensure that they have sufficient salt to maintain access to their depots in the event of snow and ice over the coming winter.

Dr Coffey: I welcome the study published this week and the debate yesterday, when a lot of contributions were made on this matter. I encourage the Minister, though, to think about extending Ofgem's protection to consumers so that they can all enjoy greater focus and access to the energy ombudsman.

Charles Hendry: As my hon. Friend will be aware, I extended an offer to her and other colleagues yesterday to meet me to talk about how we can take forward the work of the Office of Fair Trading to identify potential market abuses that still need to be dealt with, to see how the gas grid can be developed and to check that the appropriate regulation is in place.

Julian Smith: The OFT report this week risked letting a number of companies who behaved pretty badly last winter off the hook. Is the Minister not tempted to send some of these issues to the Competition Commission?

Charles Hendry: The OFT was very clear on this matter. It said that it was looking for guidance from outside input on whether there should be a Competition Commission referral. It has said that it will continue to look into cases of potential market abuse to ensure that consumers are protected.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): The Domestic Bulk Liquefied Petroleum Gas Market Investigation (Metered Estates) Order of 2009—excuse me for giving its full title—from the Competition Commission has failed abjectly to increase the ability of metered estates using LPG to change. What is the Minister going to do about that?

Charles Hendry: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. One of the most complex areas to try to get a market to operate in involves entire estates metered by a single access point. I am happy to talk to him further, and to other colleagues who have concerns about this matter, to see whether there are ways to take the situation forward. I share his concerns that people living in such estates do not always get the protection to which we feel they are entitled.

Mr Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): It is the affordability aspect of this matter that concerns me deeply. The OFT report clearly indicates that the experience people once had of getting cheap fuel in the summer months, especially heating oil, no longer exists. We need to look seriously at the affordability aspect, especially for low-income households that have never before been in fuel poverty but are now being driven into that category.

Charles Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes a useful point. This summer, we have not seen the drop that one would expect. After a year that has seen unrest in the middle east, it is clear that wholesale prices are higher. It is therefore understandable that the drop has not been so great. We should not fall into a trap, however, of assuming that prices will not ramp up again in the busy period before Christmas and the cold winter. There is a real sense that consumers are ordering early to ensure that their tanks are as full as they can be at this point, because one thing about which we can be absolutely certain is that as we move towards winter, prices will go up further.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): A significant number of my constituents are dependent on home heating oil to heat their homes. There have been severe price rises in recent months. Is there not a clear case for regulation in off-grid as well as on-grid energy? Will the Minister consider that urgently?

Charles Hendry: This issue is more acute in Northern Ireland than any other part of the country. Many more consumers are off-grid in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. This issue therefore has a particular resonance there. The OFT investigation established that 97% of consumers have access to at least four independent providers—"independent" being the critical word. The OFT is prepared to look again at examples of consumers not having access to a sufficient number of operators. In addition, where there is a potential takeover, the OFT will require it to be investigated if it appears to be uncompetitive.

Coal Mining Safety

3. **Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): What mechanism his Department has put in place to learn lessons on the safety of coal mining following recent deaths of miners. [75584]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): All serious incidents at coal mines are investigated by the mines inspectorate of the Health and Safety Executive. Fatal incidents are also investigated by the relevant local police force. I would like to take this opportunity to express again our sympathy, and I am sure the whole House will join me, to the families and colleagues of the victims of the recent incidents at Gleision and Kellingley collieries. I was able to visit Kellingley myself to see what was being done. The responsibility for implementing any recommendations in resulting reports lies with the Health and Safety Executive of the Department for Work and Pensions.

Nigel Adams: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer and thank him for visiting Kellingley colliery with me. Given that 42% of electricity in the UK during last year's freezing winter came from coal, what assurances can he give the 2,000 or so remaining coal miners about the role that coal will play in this country's energy mix in future?

Chris Huhne: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. This matter always arises when there are sad incidents of the kind that we have recorded. The Government are committed to ensuring that we can continue to use fossil-fuel power generation, not just in the short term to maintain our energy security, but in the longer term with carbon capture and storage. The challenge of decarbonising the next generation of coal-fired and gas-fired power stations is part of the carbon capture and storage programme. Yesterday, we announced the decision on Longannet. I would have very much liked to proceed with that project. However, that decision in no way undermines our commitment to the budget of £1 billion for carbon capture and storage, nor our belief that we can get a commercial project up and running within that budget—we will do so.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): When the mines were publicly owned, there were safety committees at every single pit every month, manned by the Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers and other appropriate unions. There were also mine inspectors, paid for by the union and the board, and unannounced inspections would take place. Now that we have a scattering of small mines employing very few people, what safety measures are in place? Are they parallel to what went before, and can the Secretary of State assure me that the mine rescuers in south Wales had all the necessary equipment available and ready to move when they had to go into that mine?

Chris Huhne: I thank the hon. Gentleman. This is an important issue, and he is absolutely right to highlight the potential difficulties now that the industry is smaller. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) insisted that we saw the NUM representatives when we visited Kellingley, for example, and their clear message was that they thought safety had been carefully respected in that incident. We need to keep under constant review safety at Gleision, Kellingley and the other collieries, and we will continue to do so.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As somebody who lived in the village of Rhos, may I ask the Secretary of State to join me in paying tribute to the local community for the way in which it pulled together during the tragic events at Gleision colliery? What subsequent discussions has he had with the Welsh Government about the future resourcing of the mines rescue service, considering that private mines are an expanding industry in the south Wales coalfield?

Chris Huhne: The mines rescue service is available throughout the UK, and in Gleision there were staff available from outside Wales who came in to help. That is absolutely appropriate, because in any particular case we do not know the scale of the situation.

I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the local community. One of the most admirable features of coal mining communities has historically been their extraordinary solidarity when faced with such dangers.

Carbon Emissions (Economic Situation)

4. **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect on carbon emissions of current economic conditions. [75586]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): The Department published updated energy and emissions projections last week. They took due account of the latest published economic outlook by the Office for Budget Responsibility, and of Office for National Statistics figures covering gross domestic product and output for the first six months of 2011. Both current and projected carbon emissions are now lower than in our previous projections. However, our assessment is that only a small part of those revisions is due to lower economic growth, with most being a result of higher projections for fossil fuel prices and other changes.

Mr Bone: I thank the excellent Secretary of State for that full answer, but are we not seeing that the economic climate has produced a carbon reduction that the Government could never have hoped for? Is it the Government's policy to increase the economic downturn to save more carbon?

Chris Huhne: It is absolutely not the policy of this Government—nor, I am sure, was it the policy of the last Government or any other British Government—to have a downturn in order to improve carbon emissions. It is certainly the case that if there is a downturn, it goes hand in hand with a reduction in carbon emissions, but our efforts are directed entirely at ensuring that we can have greater energy efficiency, so that we can increase our output with a lower intensity of energy use. In fact, that has been a long-standing trend in the UK economy. We have had a very substantial increase in GDP, even though we have managed to hold our energy use completely stable. That gives us considerable hope that we can continue to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We now need to increase our efficiency and have somewhat lower intensity in the answering of questions from the Treasury Bench. May I say very gently to the Secretary of State that the "War and Peace" versions of answers should be preserved for fireside chats in the long winter evenings that lie ahead?

Lindsay Roy (Glenrothes) (Lab): Plans for carbon capture and storage have descended into a farce. The length of the pipeline from Longannet to the empty reservoirs in the North sea, which is the excuse for not continuing, has not changed. Is it not the Government's economic commitment to CCS, and to the pioneering project at Longannet, that has changed?

Chris Huhne: No, I disagree with the hon. Gentleman on that. Once we had gone through the front-end engineering design studies, the specifics of the Longannet project were clear, including on the costs of transferring carbon into the reservoirs. Those costs were high; as a result, we could not do carbon capture and storage at Longannet, compared with where we believe we can do it elsewhere.

Energy Tariffs

5. **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with energy suppliers on the provision to consumers of information on how to access the cheapest tariff. [75588]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): The UK low-carbon and environmental sector is growing strongly, despite the disappointing recovery. It employs about 910,000 people, and this could reach more than 1 million by 2015—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Secretary of State might have the wrong link-up between question and answer.

Chris Huhne: You are absolutely right, Mr Speaker.

We have negotiated a voluntary agreement with suppliers to provide consumers with a prompt on their bills to cheaper deals this winter, and an additional communication to their customers who pay by cash or cheque to let them know how much they could save by moving to the cheapest direct debit tariff. There is also a commitment from suppliers to assess the impact of the prompt on bills and to improve it in the light of this evidence.

Jo Swinson: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply. Last week a Which? investigation uncovered the appalling behaviour of the big six energy companies, finding that they failed to offer the cheapest tariff in a third of calls. I welcome the moves announced this week, although I remain slightly cynical about the willingness of the energy companies to give consumers the fairest deal. Ofgem currently has the power to fine energy companies, but surely it should also be able to force companies to pay compensation in cases such as those highlighted by the Which? report, where they have effectively been mis-selling and providing inaccurate information.

Chris Huhne: I consider mis-selling to be a very serious offence, and it is a matter for the independent regulator Ofgem to investigate. As my hon. Friend pointed out, Ofgem has the power to fine energy companies. When customers have lost out, I expect energy companies to pay compensation. Unfortunately, Ofgem currently does not have the power to force companies to give consumer redress, despite the last Government having 13 years and several energy Bills to give it that power. This Government are not going to sit on our hands, unlike those on the Opposition Benches. We are carefully considering legislation on the issue as part of the next energy Bill.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Last week the Secretary of State wrote to me explaining that he believed that doorstep selling was a useful method for the big six in the industry to encourage people to a better tariff. Given that two days ago RWE npower became the fourth of the big six to give up the practice, does he not see some irony in the fact that the organisations that he was supposed to be castigating are way ahead of him?

Chris Huhne: The key issue with doorstep selling is whether the companies believe that they can control the work forces who are doing it. If they do not believe that the safeguards are adequate and that they face a reputational risk, that is a commercial matter for them to decide on.

Low-carbon Energy (Employment)

6. **Jesse Norman** (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills on steps to increase employment in the low-carbon energy sector. [75589]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): I shall try to ensure that I give the right answer this time.

The UK low-carbon and environmental sector is growing strongly despite the disappointing recovery. It employs about 910,000 people. We believe that this could reach more than 1 million by 2015, not least because of policies such as the green deal—which is in the Energy Act 2011, which has just received Royal Assent—which could see the number of people employed in the insulation industry rising from an estimated 27,000 today to around 100,000 by 2015.

Jesse Norman: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. My constituency of Hereford and South Herefordshire is home to the first house refurbished to international PassivHaus standards and is blazing a trail internationally in the quality of environmental design and construction. What advice can my right hon. Friend give to firms in Herefordshire to ensure that they are well placed to benefit from the green deal?

Chris Huhne: The green deal is a major opportunity for businesses of all sizes, in all parts of the country, because our homes are in all parts of the country. Therefore, the scheme will help to revitalise the market for energy-efficiency products in every part of our nation. The green deal and the eco-consultation will be published shortly and will set out the requirements for businesses to help them to gear up for autumn 2012, I hope in a clear way.

Mr Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): The Secretary of State rightly criticised the previous Government for pulling out of the Peterhead project, losing us world leadership and potential jobs. Is he not doing exactly the same thing with his disgraceful decision on the Longannet project?

Chris Huhne: No, I cannot agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point. It was regrettable that we did not proceed with Peterhead in 2007, and one thing that we can hold out real hope for is the fact that we have had considerable expressions of interest from Scottish and Southern, and other potential consortium members, for a Peterhead project, which should be able to proceed within budget and on time.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I welcome today's announcement on the renewables obligation certificates review, particularly in respect of marine renewables and the wave hub project off the north coast of Cornwall. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that the UK leads the world in marine renewables from now on?

Chris Huhne: One of the features of the renewables obligation review that my hon. Friend will have noticed is that we have increased our support for marine technologies to five renewables obligations certificates. In our view, that will bring forward the necessary innovation and testing to ensure that we have a world lead in this sector.

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): One such opportunity to increase employment in the low-carbon energy sector was scuppered yesterday by the Government's announcement that they were pulling out of the carbon capture and storage demonstrator at Longannet. Will the Secretary of State now confirm to the House that there will be no backsliding by the Treasury, and that the £1 billion funding will definitely be in place and will be used to get four CCS demonstration projects in place for the future?

Chris Huhne: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box and to his new role on the Front Bench speaking for the Opposition. I can certainly confirm that there is absolutely no backsliding on the money available for carbon capture and storage. The Treasury will confirm that there is £1 billion available to support CCS, and we are looking to do that in the most effective way possible so that we can ensure that the industry is rolled out, that we can have a lead in that industry, and that we are able to meet our strategic objectives in making CCS available.

Tom Greatrex: I am grateful for that response, and I hope that we will see that come to fruition, even perhaps after the Secretary of State is no longer responsible for these issues. Does he also understand the urgency involved if we are to get the employment benefits as well as the emissions benefits from CCS? Will he undertake to have urgent discussions with Infrastructure UK, to ensure that the energy hubs needed to go alongside the CCS projects are put in place, so that we get the jobs and investment benefits as well as the environmental benefits?

Chris Huhne: I have to say that I find it somewhat ironic to be lectured by the Opposition about the importance of speed in this area, given that it was the Labour Government who cancelled the Peterhead project in 2007. The reality is that we are attempting to proceed with this as quickly as we can. We have learned an awful lot from the negotiations and from the engineering studies at Longannet, and we hope that we can proceed and deliver on time and within budget.

Energy Efficiency Schemes (SMEs)

7. **Mary Macleod** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Con): What plans he has to support investment by small and medium-sized enterprises in energy efficiency schemes. [75590]

8. **John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): What plans he has to support investment by small and medium-sized enterprises in energy efficiency schemes. [75591]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): There are a number of Government policies that support small and medium-sized enterprises. The green deal, for example, will be available to SMEs when it is launched next year. It will enable them to improve the energy efficiency of their properties, thereby reducing carbon emissions and energy costs. The green deal will also drive demand for energy efficiency products and services, from which SMEs will be able to benefit.

Mary Macleod: Ormiston Wire in Isleworth has previously won the Queen's award for sustainable development, and has a wealth of experience in wind turbines, solar panels and energy-efficient lighting. Will the Government ensure that SMEs such as Ormiston Wire are represented in the discussions on the green deal, to ensure that SMEs are given real support for any energy-efficient schemes?

Charles Hendry: I am delighted to hear from my hon. Friend of the steps that Ormiston Wire has taken; they are typical of the measures that many companies have taken. The green deal is a way of encouraging SMEs to put in place energy efficiency measures, and I am glad to see that they are taking advantage of that. The feed-in tariff regime will also encourage them to look at microgeneration.

John Glen: I thank the Minister for his replies. Many businesses in Salisbury are very supportive of the intentions of the green deal, but can he explain how consumers will be able to have access to the widest possible choice of green deal providers from 2012?

Charles Hendry: One of the key aspects of the green deal is that companies will be able to seek an assessment and take it to any green deal provider. This will provide real consumer choice. We have found it most encouraging that providers have been coming forward and offering their services, because they see this as good for growth in the economy as well as for energy efficiency.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): But may I urge the Minister to press the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to do more to engage with SMEs on the green deal. The experience of a small enterprise in my constituency is that officials have stopped talking to them and that BIS is going ahead instead with trials with large organisations such as B&Q. More joined-up working is needed.

Charles Hendry: I am intrigued to hear what the hon. Lady has said and I would be grateful if she gave us more information about it. We have regular contact and a very constructive relationship with BIS, which is looking at a finance aggregator to try to help SMEs to take advantage of the opportunities available within this package. The whole issue of financing is at the core of the work that BIS is doing. If the hon. Lady would like to give us more information, we could respond in more detail to her particular concerns.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): With growth flatlining and unemployment rising we urgently need a plan to get our economy growing. That means creating jobs, particularly for Britain's 2 million small businesses. That is why we proposed amendments to what is now the Energy Act 2011 that would have boosted small business. We suggested lowering the cost of administration to give small businesses, along with charities, social enterprises and co-operatives, fair access to the green deal marketplace. Will the Minister tell us why the Government voted in Committee against supporting small British businesses, and will he commit today to backing our plans in secondary legislation?

Charles Hendry: We are absolutely committed to small and medium-sized companies having access to these issues and we are keen to find the best way of dealing with it. In that respect, we are committed to bringing forward further measures. As for the delays, the hon. Lady should be aware that we proposed a green deal, exactly as it is now, in the Energy Bill of 2010—almost two years ago—and it was voted down in principle and in concept by the then Labour Government, who have lost us nearly two years in rolling out energy efficiency.

Energy Tariffs

9. **Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): If he will take steps to simplify energy tariffs for consumers. [75592]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): One of the main aims of the Ofgem retail market review is to reduce tariff complexity, making bills easier to compare. I welcome these proposals and look forward to Ofgem's forthcoming consultation on its plans to simplify tariffs and boost competition.

Pauline Latham: In the light of the news that fewer customers are now switching supplier, despite the proven benefits of doing so, I welcome the Government's new "check, switch, insulate to save" scheme, but how will the Minister ensure that consumers, particularly the elderly who do not necessarily have access to computers or computer skills, take up the savings available?

Charles Hendry: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. After yesterday's debate, I think the whole House will be entirely aware of my own inability to switch because of the complexity of the regime online. We have required the energy companies to write to 4 million vulnerable customers this winter so that they understand that they could be on a lower tariff and what more might be available to them in terms of energy efficiency and they get what help is currently available.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): We have heard a lot about last Monday's summit. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government directly asked the big six companies whether they were prepared to freeze gas and electricity prices or indeed reduce them in the future?

Charles Hendry: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. The important point about the summit was that the industry, consumer groups and the Government were working together. Most of the energy companies have already said that they will freeze the prices right through this coming winter and that there will be no further increases. What we have also looked at is what can be done right now. Sometimes the cynicism—not from the hon. Gentleman but from some of his colleagues—about the measures to check and insulate in order to get the best savings is unfortunate because it means that constituents who could be doing more to help themselves and take advantage of what is already on offer might be inclined not to do so.

Fuel Poverty

11. **Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): What recent discussions he has had on reducing fuel poverty; and if he will make a statement. [75594]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): I regularly engage with stakeholders such as energy companies and consumer organisations to discuss our policies to assist low-income and vulnerable households to heat their homes more affordably. I recently had interesting discussions with Professor John Hills, the author of the fuel poverty review.

Chris White: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. One way of reducing fuel poverty is through providing more support to lower-income families to make their homes more energy-efficient. I appreciate that the Government's proposed energy company obligations seek to do that, but I ask the Secretary of State for an update on his Department's progress in creating those obligations, and will he tell us when he hopes they will come into effect?

Chris Huhne: My hon. Friend is right. A key focus of the energy company obligation will be on householders who cannot achieve significant energy savings without an additional measure of support. That will include, through the affordable warmth target, specific assistance to the poorest and most vulnerable people to help them keep their homes warm affordably. We are consulting this autumn on secondary legislation for the green deal and the ECO, as I have said in answer to colleagues before, and we intend to launch them in autumn 2012.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I welcome the Government's support for Labour's motion yesterday, which said:

"with a cold winter forecast and Government support cut, millions of families will struggle to heat their homes".—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 1006.]

I am glad that the Secretary of State agrees with that. What is he going to do about it this winter?

Chris Huhne: The right hon. Lady should be aware that under the warm home discount scheme—a statutory scheme, not a voluntary grace-and-favour one of the sort operated by the Labour Government—we will be providing substantial support to 600,000 particularly vulnerable key pensioners. That amounts to £120 off their bills, and is a two-thirds increase on what was available under the voluntary scheme operated by the previous Government.

Caroline Flint: I understand that the benefit of the warm home discount is less than the profits that the energy companies make. Yesterday, Government Members also supported our demand

"that energy companies use their profits to help reduce bills this winter."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 1007.]

How and when will the Secretary of State make that happen?

Chris Huhne: On Monday, at the energy summit, we discussed with the energy companies exactly how they could help, and there are a number of ways in which they are doing that. For example, they have made a voluntary commitment, which they will implement this winter, to state in every bill whether cheaper tariffs are available, to provide energy-saving advice and to promote the "check, switch, insulate to save" campaign, which I hope will—with the right hon. Lady's backing, I am sure—be a great success.

Fuel Costs

13. **Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the cost of gas and electricity for consumers. [75596]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State chaired a summit with consumer groups on Monday to launch the "check, switch, insulate to save" campaign and a package of measures to help consumers this winter. We are working with consumer groups, energy suppliers and the regulator Ofgem to ensure that consumers know how to save money on their energy bills by checking on their energy deal, switching their supplier if appropriate and insulating their homes.

Mr Nuttall: I do not know whether the Minister has had a chance to read a recent book entitled "Let Them Eat Carbon", by Matthew Sinclair of the TaxPayers Alliance, but if he has he will have noted Citigroup's estimate that this country will have to spend more on meeting environmental targets than Germany, France, Spain and Italy put together. Does he accept that when those costs are passed on they will result in even higher energy bills for consumers?

Charles Hendry: I have serious doubts about the information in that book about the relative costs, particularly compared with countries such as Germany. We have to deal with a legacy of a failure of investment over the past 13 years. Every year of this decade, we will have to secure investment in our energy infrastructure at twice the rate secured in the previous decade, which will entail a cost to consumers, who are picking up the tab for Labour's failures.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I remind the Minister that a leading expert on energy said only this week in the precincts of the House that the real reason for the astronomical energy price rises was the privatisation of the energy industry and the sweating of assets over many years? Is that not the truth? Is that not why we have rocketing energy costs and our European neighbours do not?

Charles Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes some of the points that I was just making. The sweating of assets to which he referred resulted from the lack of investment over the past 13 years in the building of new plants. It is 15 years since the last nuclear plant was opened, 25 years since it was commissioned and 40 years since the last coal plant was opened. We have not seen enough investment in plant, and that is a legacy issue that is now being addressed. As a result of competition, we ended up with some of the cheapest electricity and gas prices in the whole of Europe, but we have to make up for that legacy of failure.

Mr Speaker: We are certainly using a lot of energy today, that is for sure.

Laura Sandys (South Thanet) (Con): I want to return to consumers and their costs. Will the Minister urge Ofgem to reconsider the unit as a specification? What does "a unit" mean? Could we not look at cost per bulb hour, and other things that consumers understand? That will drive behaviour change as well.

Charles Hendry: Let me say in response to your comment, Mr Speaker, that I like to see myself as a source of endless renewable energy. As for the point that my hon. Friend has rightly made, clarity is indeed a real issue. People are confused because they simply do not know what the term "unit" might refer to. I hope that Ofgem and the industry will try to establish what more can be done to ensure that it is absolutely clear how much energy people are using.

Energy-intensive Industries

14. **Tristram Hunt** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): What information Ministers in his Department gathered on the policies of other countries on maintaining the competitiveness of energy-intensive industries during recent visits to Europe. [75597]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Gregory Barker), visited Germany last month to see at first hand how German policy on the competitiveness of energy-intensive industries is put into practice. My officials are also working with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Treasury to prepare a package of measures for the most affected energy-intensive businesses, which we plan to announce before the end of the year.

Mr Hunt: Does the Minister agree that the German experience shows that it is possible to adopt both a strong commitment to moving towards a low-carbon economy and a comprehensive range of measures that protect the competitiveness of energy-intensive sectors? Will he take steps to ensure that the mitigating strategies that the Government will announce this autumn benefit not just the larger companies, but smaller energy-intensive companies such as those in the ceramics sector, which can help to rebalance the economy?

Charles Hendry: Let me begin by thanking the hon. Gentleman for the work that he is doing in the all-party group that he leads. It is extremely valuable to the whole sector. There must be a balance between moving in a low-carbon direction and ensuring that successful businesses are not driven abroad, and the measures on which we are working with BIS and the Treasury are intended to strike that balance. If those companies simply moved overseas, we lost the jobs and they continued to emit carbon in the same way, there would be no net gain for the world climate—or, indeed, the UK economy.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I am pleased that the Minister recognises the concerns of energy-intensive industries such as those involved in packaging manufacture and CEMEX, in my constituency, which manufactures cement. CEMEX faces a £20 million bill for complying with carbon legislation, which is causing concern about the viability of its UK plant. Will the Minister do all he can to ensure that UK manufacturing industry is not placed at a competitive disadvantage?

Charles Hendry: Let me reassure my hon. Friend that we regularly meet representatives of industry and industry groups to ensure that we understand the full range of concerns. The work currently being done across Government is designed to ensure that we first understand where the challenges and threats are coming from, and then introduce sensible measures to protect companies of important national and strategic interest. I think that that strikes the right balance, but we are always keen to receive representations from Members on both sides of the House about specific constituency issues.

Carbon Emissions (Local Authorities)

18. **Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): What plans he has to involve local authorities in meeting the UK's targets for reducing carbon emissions. [75603]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): Local authorities are uniquely placed to provide leadership and vision in tackling climate change in their communities. Many are enthusiastic about playing their part, and have stretched their ambitions to reduce carbon emissions in their areas. My Department involves local authorities in a range of policies, including some on the roll-out of the green deal.

Phil Wilson: Given that 22% of County Durham's energy needs come from renewable energy sources, including 17 wind farms—is one of the best records in England—and given that the figure in the Secretary of State's own county of Hampshire is only about 4%, does he agree that we should be sharing the burden as well as the benefits of renewable infrastructure?

Chris Huhne: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am very much in favour of increasing the amount of renewable energy throughout the United Kingdom. The renewables obligation review proposes that support should be targeted particularly on areas where there is the most wind, because it is in no one's interest to build wind turbines where there is an inadequate wind resource.

Mr Speaker: I call Stephen Gilbert. He is not here, so I call Julie Hilling.

Energy Bill

20. **Julie Hilling** (Bolton West) (Lab): What plans he has to provide support for households in meeting the cost of energy bills. [75605]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): I refer the hon. Lady to the answer that I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) a few moments ago.

Julie Hilling: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I still do not understand what he is going to do to prevent people from dying this winter. Will he also urge the Government to reconsider the decision to cut the winter fuel allowance?

Charles Hendry: As the hon. Lady well knows, the winter fuel allowance was introduced by the last Government. Had it not been for the fact that—as one of her colleagues who was then a Minister pointed out—there was no money left, we might have been able to consider some of these matters further. However, we have implemented the policy of the last Labour Administration, and in the meantime we are trying to ensure that people check their bills for accuracy, insulate their homes, and look for better arrangements to which they might switch. That makes evident sense, because it can bring significant benefits, and it should not be dismissed, because it will help many of the hon. Lady's constituents.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): What has been done for customers with prepayment meters and keys? Their bills are more expensive per unit, and as they are not sent a bill there are limited opportunities for the energy companies to communicate with them, and so little choice is offered to them.

Charles Hendry: There is evidence, which Ofgem is gathering, that people on prepayment meters are paying less now than they were in the past. One reason we have been keen to take forward the smart meter programme is to ensure that people get absolute accuracy in their billing. That programme is furthest advanced in Northern Ireland, and people on prepayment meters there pay less than people on normal tariffs.

Topical Questions

T1. [75607] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): My Department is tasked with powering our people and protecting our planet. Since the last departmental questions, we have published the renewables obligation banding review, which examines the support that different technologies will receive under the renewables obligation. We have also published the electricity market reform White Paper, which sets out our plans to secure affordable low-carbon energy for decades to come. We have also held a consumer energy summit, bringing together consumer groups, the industry, Ministers and the regulator to help people save money on their bills this winter. Finally, the Energy Bill—including our flagship energy-saving programme, the green deal—received Royal Assent on Tuesday and is now the Energy Act 2011.

Ian Lavery: The Secretary of State is aware of the situation at Rio Tinto Alcan at Lynemouth in my constituency. Some 650 private sector jobs are hanging by a thread. The company says that the problem is the green taxes implemented by the Government, which will wipe out £50 million in annual profit. Will the Minister say when he will make announcements on the renewables obligation certificates banding and on the energy-intensive industries package, and will he assure the House that those packages combined will prevent mass job losses in the energy-intensive industry sector?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, not least because I have had discussions with Rio Tinto about the Alcan plant. It is regrettable that it made its decision ahead of the publication of the renewables obligation. That was published today, so, to answer one of the hon. Gentleman's questions, those figures are now available, and we have just heard from the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry), that the energy efficiency package for energy-intensive industries will be in place by the end of the year. In our discussions with Rio Tinto I asked the company whether it would give a guarantee about local employment if it received the support that it wanted in converting the electricity generation plant to biomass. It did not give that guarantee. That is regrettable, and the hon. Gentleman will have noticed that the Alcan decision is part of a wider programme of worldwide disposals by the company.

Mr Speaker: We are all significantly better informed.

T2. [75608] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Following on from the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Tessa Munt), with energy prices at an all-time high, many low-income families are opting to convert to prepayment meters for their gas and electricity supply. However, according to Consumer Focus that can cost up to £195 extra per year. Will the Secretary of State consider introducing regulation of the market to ensure that low-income families pay the same regardless of whether their payment method is by prepayment meters, direct debit or quarterly bills?

Chris Huhne: Energy tariffs are a matter for Ofgem. It has put in place rules to prevent unfair price differentials such as those between different payment methods and has reported on the effectiveness of those changes. It has found that prepayment meter customers now pay on average about £20 less than standard credit customers for their gas and electricity. It has also found that direct debit customers now pay on average £70 less than others, which falls within the £88 indicative cost difference between providing direct debit accounts and other types of agreement.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Labour Opposition day motion, which the Secretary of State supported yesterday, calls on the Government

"to investigate mis-selling and ensure consumers are compensated".

He seems to believe that that can apply only to future mis-selling, but examples such as payment protection insurance and lawyers charging additional fees to coal health claimants prove that that is not the case. Will he back our demand for an urgent inquiry into mis-selling, with redress for those who have already suffered?

Chris Huhne: The clear advice that I have received is that, legally, we will have to legislate to ensure that redress is available for energy consumers—but I am happy to look at any evidence that the right hon. Lady has to the contrary, and if we can move further and faster, we will. However, our advice at present is that we will need new legislation, and it is a matter of great regret to me that the Labour Government did not implement that.

T4. [75611] **Mr David Ward** (Bradford East) (LD): My understanding is that under the green deal golden rule, monthly repayments should be lower than the energy savings, but this makes them very sensitive to interest rate charges on the loans. What progress is being made on setting up a new not-for-profit company that can offer green deal loans at below market rates?

Chris Huhne: We have made considerable progress on this matter. The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) was talking about the aggregator, which seeks to ensure that we get good support for small businesses, and that is an important part of it. On the point about the costs being sensitive to interest rates, the way we envisage this working is that the financing will, in most cases, be available at fixed rates, so that the consumer will know in advance exactly what those interest rates will be. That is one of the reasons why the assurance can be made about the green deal offering a reduction in the overall energy bill.

T3. [75610] **Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): In five years' time, when judgments are made about the value of the ineptocracy being created by the Tory-Lib Dem junta at the moment, will we see their main crime as being their neglect of the immense power of the tides in creating energy that is clean, British, cheap and eternal?

Chris Huhne: The hon. Gentleman has a marvellous turn of phrase, and I pay tribute to that. However, he has chosen his question with extraordinarily inappropriate timing, because we have today announced a renewables obligation review that increases the renewables obligation certificates available for precisely the technology that he seeks to advocate.

T5. [75612] **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): York Handmade Brick Company is precisely the type of company that would benefit from the exemption from carbon floor prices now being given in Germany. Will the Government agree to extend the number of industries—from aluminium and other industries to brick and ceramics—that benefit from high energy user exemptions in this country?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. With UK support, the European Union agreed in May that the ceramics sector is at significant risk of carbon leakage, and as a result that sector will receive 100% of its European Union emissions trading scheme credits free from 2013. That will enable the sector to contribute to the environmental outcomes of the ETS while maintaining its own competitiveness.

T6. [75613] **Tony Lloyd** (Manchester Central) (Lab): Professor John Hills's review revealed that at least 2,700 people die every winter because they cannot afford to heat their homes. With energy prices significantly up in real terms this year and last year, and with winter fuel payments down in real terms this year and last year, what guarantees can Ministers give that that death rate will not increase?

Chris Huhne: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am delighted, as I am sure he is, at the thoroughness of the interim report by Professor John Hills, which I commissioned. I do not think that winter fuel payments are the best way of dealing with this problem, partly because they are not targeted. The warm home discount does target a two-thirds increase in the discounts on this particularly vulnerable group. That will have an effect this winter, despite the substantial increases in prices that the hon. Gentleman points out.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): As a London MP, I am often struck by the energy inefficiency of office buildings in the capital, whose lights blaze throughout the night, regardless of whether anybody is working in them. Will the Minister say what steps he is taking to tackle light pollution and the energy inefficiency of office buildings? In particular, is there a case to be made for mandatory movement-sensitive lighting systems?

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Charles Hendry): My hon. Friend raises an extremely interesting issue. I have the sense sometimes that Canary Wharf would be visible from Mars at night, and there are some lessons that we need to learn. The Government are showing leadership on this: simply by using energy-saving measures we have cut our own emissions by 20% in DECC over the year, and all Government Departments have cut theirs by 10%. We need to involve people who work in such buildings so that we can get their ideas about the contribution they can make, because this is as much about human endeavour as the advances in technology.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): An increasing number of my constituents are telling me that they are not just anxious but frightened about whether they will be able to pay their winter fuel bills. I ask the Minister not what the regulator or the companies has done but what specific representations the Minister or the Prime Minister made to the six big energy companies about keeping the cost of energy down or freezing it? If he cannot give me the details today, will he write to me and set that out?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. We came away from the energy summit not just having made representations to the energy companies but with a list of specific actions that will help, including, for example, the 4 million letters that will be sent out to vulnerable groups on access to energy saving. We were determined to secure all those points as a result of the energy summit, and we did.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): As Rio Tinto has shown itself more determined to sell aluminium plants across the world, including in Lynemouth, than to engage in the discussions that the Secretary of State has been willing to have with it, is he equally willing to have discussions with any new buyer who might be prepared to take on the Lynemouth plant?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that question. Of course I am. I would be delighted to have discussions. I want to see jobs preserved both at Lynemouth and in the rest of the country. We hope that aluminium can continue to be produced in this country because, in our thrust towards low-carbon transition, we will need aluminium as part of the raw materials for that revolution.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Will the Minister urgently investigate the impediment that his Department is imposing on new entrants in the energy market by back-charging for levy obligations after a company has a certain number of customers in its roster? Will he make proposals to deal with that anomaly so that such entrants are not impeded?

Charles Hendry: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I would be happy to discuss it further with him. We have lifted the threshold at which those obligations start from 50,000 customers to 250,000 customers, which will greatly assist smaller companies to get involved in the sector. If there are barriers about which he wants to talk further, we are keen to remove them and will be happy to engage with him in trying to assist such companies.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give us an update on the decision-making process for the location of the green investment bank? Does he agree that the bid by Leeds, in Yorkshire, looks particularly attractive?

Chris Huhne: I see that we have now got on to the topographical, rather than the topical, part of Question Time. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, rather than the Department of Energy and Climate Change, has the lead responsibility for the green investment bank. Progress is being made, the advisory group has been set up, and I am confident that we will be able to make good progress in the coming months.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Installing insulation attracts a 5% reduced VAT rate, and so do installing central heating and hot water system controls, but installing an energy-efficient boiler attracts the 20% standard rate. Is the Secretary of State talking to Treasury colleagues about this, and the need for a 5% rate on all building repair, maintenance and improvement works for energy efficiency projects that are eligible under the green deal?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful for that question. The VAT regime and its complexities are a mystery to many of us who have studied it over the years. It is full of oddities. Of course, that is not just a matter for the Treasury, because the VAT that can be levied is subject to EU rules, too. The question of particular anomalies arises not just at a British level but at European level.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on the progress being made by the Government on the renewable heat incentive?

Charles Hendry: The renewable heat incentive, as my hon. Friend will be aware, is a world beater and a new approach on which we are very glad to lead. We have taken it forward for commercial industrial premises. There has been a challenge from the European Commission that we are in the process of sorting out, and we are finalising the details for the domestic sector because we recognise that it is an important way of encouraging people to consider alternative ways of heating their homes.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Analysis commissioned by G20 Finance Ministers shows that applying a carbon price to international transport fuels will both reduce emissions and generate billions of pounds for climate finance for developing countries. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of that report, and what discussions is he having with ministerial colleagues about agreeing a UK position on it in advance of the Durban climate conference?

Chris Huhne: I am particularly keen on this area, as I was on the UN Secretary-General's advisory group on finance that recommended that it should go forward and that the G20 should look at it. We are having continuing discussions, and I am very hopeful that this is one of the most fruitful areas in which we can raise climate finance for developing countries.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): I have a number of constituents in very rural areas who are off-gas and have wood-burning stoves that can be connected to radiator systems. They are deliberately avoiding the installation of oil-fired boilers because of the high cost of heating oil and the local availability of wood. If someone in that position were to install a radiator heating system powered by their existing wood burner, would it be eligible for funding under the green deal scheme?

Chris Huhne: The green deal scheme is specifically for insulation, but the renewable heat incentive scheme is available precisely to provide alternatives to oil-fired boilers in off-gas-grid areas, for example. I understand that some of the offers are very attractive here and now. We have some support for residential schemes, and they will be expanded when we have assessed the pilots next year.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): Yesterday's news on Longannet was obviously deeply disappointing to my constituents, and to the whole of Fife. Will the Secretary of State set out what assessment he has made of the medium-term future of the station, and will his Department work with me to secure a long-term future for it? Will he also confirm that despite the bluster and spin from the Scottish National party Government, not a single penny has been offered by Mr Salmond?

Charles Hendry: May I first thank the hon. Gentleman for the very constructive way in which he has engaged in this process and for the support that he has given to his constituents? I think that there is joint disappointment that it has not been possible to take that project forward. The longer-term future of the plant will now be a matter for the company, and that was always going to be one of the problems of a retrospective regime at an old plant with the upgrading costs that would have been necessary. I am delighted that he will engage with us as Ministers and with our officials on the best way of taking things forward, because we are completely committed to seeing carbon capture and storage developed, preferably in Scotland. As far as I am aware, not one penny of support was offered by the Scottish Government.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): In respect of the Minister of State's responses regarding the Office of Fair Trading's inquiry into off-grid energy supplies, which identified the importance of a diversity of suppliers, does he accept that the nature of the contracts that have been entered into restricts the opportunities for those who are supplied, particularly where they are forced to have a container to hold the liquefied petroleum gas?

Charles Hendry: The Office of Fair Trading has indicated that it will look at further examples of market abuse and anti-competitive behaviour, and that it is looking for evidence to be submitted to it in order to take that work forward, so there will undoubtedly be areas of further work that needs to be done. Some of that may need to be referred to the Competition Commission, and I hope that my hon. Friend will make forceful representations to that effect.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I must squeeze in Naomi Long.

Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): The extraction of shale gas by hydraulic fracturing carries with it significant environmental risks. What assessment have the Government made of those risks, and what discussions have they had with their counterparts in the Northern Ireland Assembly about those?

Charles Hendry: Let me reassure the hon. Lady that any shale gas extraction has to abide by exactly the same environmental and regulatory restrictions as any other oil and gas developments. There has been only very limited interest, and there is only one drilling application at the moment, in Lancashire, with Cuadrilla. It has potential for the United Kingdom but the issues here are very different from those in the United States in terms of land ownership rights, which I think will impede its development here compared with the rate in the US. It has a potential role to play, but it will be done within very strict environmental constraints.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: As usual, demand exceeds supply, but we must move on.

Business of the House

11.34 am

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): The business for the week commencing 24 October will be:

MONDAY 24 OCTOBER—Motion relating to a national referendum on the European Union. This subject has been nominated by the Backbench Business Committee. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister plans to make a statement on the European Council.

TUESDAY 25 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Public Bodies Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 26 OCTOBER—Opposition day [unallotted day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 27 OCTOBER—A general debate on the UK chairmanship of the Council of Europe.

The provisional business for the week commencing 31 October will include:

MONDAY 31 OCTOBER—Instruction relating to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Continuation of remaining stages of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 2 NOVEMBER—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill (day 3).

THURSDAY 3 NOVEMBER—Business nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 27 October will be:

THURSDAY 27 OCTOBER—A debate on NHS care of older people.

I remind the House that the week commencing 31 October will be Parliament week. This is an exciting new national initiative, exploring how democracy affects citizens and how they can participate in it. Of particular interest to Members during Parliament week will be the fact that the UK Youth Parliament is holding its annual debate in the Chamber on Friday 4 November. I look forward to welcoming all those taking part on that day, and I am sure that other hon. Members will take an interest in the proceedings.

Ms Eagle: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his answer. I certainly hope that the business remains the same until we get to Monday because we have had two very drastic changes in less than 24 hours.

I pay tribute to the outgoing Serjeant at Arms, who will be sorely missed when she leaves in the new year. She is the first woman to hold the post and she has served the House with distinction for 18 years.

Never let it be said that business questions does not achieve results. Just 24 hours after my first appearance here as shadow Leader of the House last week, the Prime Minister answered my call to include more women in his Cabinet. If he is going to take my advice that quickly, I start today by calling for an immediate general election. *[Interruption.]* They are already out there campaigning.

At the beginning of the week we all saw the astonishing pictures of the Minister of State, Cabinet Office taking his regular early morning strolls in the park. He is well known for his wisdom. He recently startled a group of his own Back Benchers by announcing that the Government would run out of ideas by 2012. Some of us think that they already have. He then upset the Deputy Prime Minister by saying:

> "We don't want more people from Sheffield flying away on cheap holidays."

Now it appears that the Prime Minister's policy supremo and blue-sky thinker has developed a penchant for al fresco filing and is the subject of two official investigations as a result. Is not the real problem that he has been throwing away the wrong things? Next time he is out for an early morning stroll in the park he should be throwing the Government's failing economic strategy and their wasteful NHS plans in the bin, rather than disposing of his constituents' private details. May we have a debate on Ministers who think that the rules do not apply to them?

Speaking of which, in his statement yesterday the Leader of the House said that it was time to move on from the scandal engulfing the former Secretary of State for Defence. Will he accept that we cannot move on while serious questions remain? In that context, it has been widely reported that the former Secretary of State used his then parliamentary office to run his discredited charity, Atlantic Bridge. Has the Leader of the House conducted an investigation into this issue, and if so is he satisfied that no parliamentary rules were broken by that unusual arrangement?

If yesterday saw the House at its most combative, Monday saw the House at its most consensual. The injustice and raw emotion still felt by the Hillsborough families was movingly reflected in this House on Monday in one of the most powerful debates I have witnessed in all my time as a Member of this place. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating the Backbench Business Committee on the speed with which it facilitated that important debate? Members on both sides of the House now recognise the urgent need to release all the documents relating to the disaster to get finally at the truth and bring some comfort to the families. Following the disgraceful comments yesterday by Sir Oliver Popplewell, who accused the families of harbouring conspiracy theories, will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to join Opposition Members in condemning unreservedly those crass and insensitive remarks.

The Leader of the House has just announced last-minute, wholesale changes to next week's business. There have been two major changes to business in less than 24 hours, and the right hon. Gentleman has brought forward the Public Bodies Bill and shifted the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill back by a week. That Bill has been ambushed by Tory hangers and floggers, and torn to pieces, both in the press and by the legal profession. It is all too obvious that the Ministry of Justice is in a mess and cannot even bring its Bill to the House.

The most revealing announcement from the Leader of the House was about the Government's decision to rush forward the debate proposing a referendum on

Britain's membership of the European Union from Thursday to first thing Monday. Fifty-nine Conservatives have already declared their intention to defy their leader, and there are reports that at least five ministerial aides are on the brink of resignation, so is that not proof of a growing Tory mutiny that has the Prime Minister running scared, the Whips Office in a panic and a Government split from top to bottom? Will the Leader of the House confirm that if he thought he could have got away with it, he would have scheduled this debate on Sunday evening during "Songs of Praise"?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those questions, and I endorse entirely what she said about Jill Pay, the Serjeant at Arms, who has been a doughty servant of the House for so long, and who will be much missed when she retires in January.

The hon. Lady rightly pointed out that within 24 hours I responded to her request for more women in the Cabinet. On the issue of calling a general election, I have announced an Opposition day, and it is perfectly open to the Opposition to table a vote of no confidence in the Government. I am sure that she had the approval of the Leader of the Opposition in laying down that challenge.

We held a debate on the economy last week, and we spent some time on the issue. It remains our view that an essential ingredient of growth is low interest rates, and we believe that the policies advocated by the Opposition would prejudice that. A 1% rise in interest rates would, on average, increase mortgage costs by £80 a month, which would not be welcomed by householders.

I agree that the debate on Monday was a very, very moving debate that showed the House at its best, and it was a credit to the Backbench Business Committee that it scheduled. It was the product of the e-petition system that was introduced at the beginning of this Parliament in response to a coalition agreement commitment, and it was a credit to that system, too.

I have not read the comments by Justice Popplewell, but I would condemn any insensitive comments, particularly at this moment in time. I think that the House is united in urging everyone to work constructively with the independent panel so that the public can finally learn the truth.

The final issue raised by the hon. Lady was the business for next week. When I first became a Member of Parliament, we received the business for one week ahead, and that was it. A few years ago, it was changed, so one week was fixed and business for the second week was provisional. The deal was always that the second week was provisional. We try not to make any changes, because we know that that causes disruption, but occasionally it is necessary. Last Thursday I announced that next Thursday would be devoted to a debate approved by the Backbench Business Committee. The motion was not tabled until yesterday—Wednesday—which was when the Government saw the motion on an EU referendum.

My view—I hope that it is shared by the Backbench Business Committee and the House—is that the debate would be enriched by the presence of the Foreign Secretary. He is available on Monday; he is not available, because he will be at the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference in Australia, on Thursday. That is why we brought the debate forward to Monday, and I think that the House would welcome a debate addressed by the Foreign Secretary. I hope that that is generally understood. Consideration of the Public Bodies Bill in Committee ended two weeks ago, and it is entirely appropriate that we deal with the remaining stages next Tuesday.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my utter frustration with Opposition Members constantly talking women down? May we have a debate to celebrate British women and what the Government are doing to support more women and girls to fulfil their full potential? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We are all interested to hear about the frustrations of the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, even if they are expressed from a sedentary position.

Sir George Young: I am sure that my right hon. Friend would welcome any opportunity to celebrate women, Mr. Speaker.

We discussed on Tuesday the changes we made to the Pensions Bill, which have reduced the delay that confronted women before they became entitled to the state pension. We have announced changes to the universal credit so that those working less than 16 hours a week will be entitled to child care payments, and we are taking a range of measures, not least the Work programme, that will help those women who want to return to part-time work. I would welcome such a debate, but at the moment I cannot find time to schedule one.

Mr Bob Ainsworth (Coventry North East) (Lab): There will be suspicion in the House about the timing of the Report stage of the Public Bodies Bill. There is growing concern about the Government's inadequate response to the call for the establishment of the office of the chief coroner. If we consider the Bill on Report next Tuesday, that is well ahead of any intention by the Government to publish and make available the details of the responses to the consultation on this issue. How can we deal with the Bill on Report without those responses? Will the Leader of the House put them in the Library?

Sir George Young: The Bill is of course paving legislation; it introduces the capacity to make the changes to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. The Bill finished in Committee two weeks ago and only one amendment is down for consideration, so I think that one day on Report is appropriate. The progress of the Bill on Tuesday in no way precludes the progress for which the right hon. Gentleman has just asked.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a statement on whether the Government will recompense anyone who planned to attend a lobby of Parliament next Thursday, organised by the People's Pledge, but have now had to reorganise their travel plans as a result of the rescheduling of Government business?

Sir George Young: If the Government were to be liable for changes in the provisional business for the second week, I suspect that the consequence would be that it would never be announced. It is perfectly possible for those who want to lobby Parliament to do so next Thursday.

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Although I welcome the participation of the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister in the debate on Monday, does the Leader of the House agree that such short-notice rescheduling could be avoided by simply giving the Backbench Business Committee a set day every week, perhaps Wednesday afternoon, in which to schedule its business? While on the subject of scheduling business, will he please confirm what time the Government will give the Committee in the Chamber between now and the end of the Session to compensate for the extended length of the Session?

Sir George Young: I welcome what the hon. Lady says about the Foreign Secretary's participation in the debate, as I think it is important, as I said, that he takes part. Although a fixed day for Back-Bench business would give certainty, it would not necessarily overcome the particular problem of Ministers being unavailable on a fixed day for debates that are settled at short notice.

On the hon. Lady's question, we have said that we will give proportionately more time to the Backbench Business Committee to reflect the longer Session. She will know from the business I have announced that the Committee is getting roughly one day a week. I said in response to her a few weeks ago that once we are through the main Report stages of the Government's Bills, there should be more headroom in the remaining months of the Session to be more generous to the Committee with time.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I welcome the words of the Leader of the House on the importance of e-petitions leading to debates such as the one on Hillsborough? Does he agree that that also applies to the debate on the referendum, which he has brought forward to Monday? I welcome the fact that the Government have elevated the importance of that debate and recognise how important it is that the Foreign Secretary attends. Does the Leader of the House not also agree that these issues overlap with the core purpose of the coalition, which is deficit reduction and the need to obtain growth, and that growth can be revived in this country only if we are able to deregulate our economy and therefore renegotiate our relationship with the EU?

Sir George Young: We are committed to an agenda of deregulation. For example, there is the one-in, one-out rule; there is a deregulation unit working at the moment to see what further deregulation can be introduced; and we are working on the agenda of the report by Lord Young, introduced a year ago. I see no reason why we should not continue with that agenda and still remain full members of the European Union.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We should not draw up the timetable for our business according to the convenience of Ministers; it should be about the convenience of this House. The Leader of the House has already committed in the coalition agreement to hand over the whole of our business to the Backbench Business Committee by the third year of this Parliament, which I reckon means—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it says "by" the third year; it does not say "in" the third year. I reckon that means that he has only 19 more sessions of business questions, so when will he bring forward the legislation or Standing Orders to ensure that we do hand over the whole of our business to the Backbench Business Committee?

Sir George Young: Unusually, the hon. Gentleman is wholly misinformed about the commitment in the coalition agreement. There is no commitment to hand over the whole of our business to the Backbench Business Committee.

Chris Bryant: Yes there is.

Sir George Young: There is not. There is a commitment to establish a House business committee alongside the Backbench Business Committee. We are committed to doing that, and we remain committed to doing it in the third year of the Parliament.

Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am absolutely delighted—indeed, thrilled—that the Government are so keen to discuss the European Union that they have brought the business forward to Monday, but what will the Leader of the House say to those members of the public who might have preferred one or two more weeks to make their views perfectly clear to their MPs?

Sir George Young: Earlier in this session, the Backbench Business Committee was commended for scheduling the debate, which was going to be next Thursday and is now next Monday, so I find it difficult to reconcile what my hon. Friend says with the freedom that we have given to the Committee to respond promptly to e-petitions. The e-petition in question was started many weeks ago, and people have had adequate time to contact their Members of Parliament if they so wish to.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May we have a debate in Government time on the work of the Electoral Commission? A report out today strongly criticises the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland for

> "poor planning, insufficient communication and lack of an overall management plan"

for the counts during the Assembly elections, the referendum and the council elections held in May. Voters in Northern Ireland deserve the same high standards that apply elsewhere in the United Kingdom, so a debate would be very useful in focusing attention on those serious matters.

Sir George Young: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's concern. I cannot promise a debate, but I will draw the attention of the Electoral Commission for Northern Ireland and, indeed, of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to the concerns that he has expressed.

Mark Reckless (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the People's Pledge on pressing for a referendum on Europe and the debate on Monday? Does he agree that another advantage of having the Foreign Secretary here for Monday's debate is that he will then be able to report the good news to our Commonwealth partners?

Sir George Young: That, if I may say so, was not the question I was expecting from my hon. Friend, but it is of course a much easier one, and the answer is yes, the

Foreign Secretary will be able to pass on the views of the House when he goes to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting later in the week.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On 18 July, the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning announced that he was working with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government and with the Association of Colleges on new forms of support for community-based ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—learning for those in settled communities who are not in receipt of eligible benefits, but colleges have had no funding for such courses since August. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent statement from the Minister updating us on his discussions with CLG colleagues so that funding can be secured?

Sir George Young: I understand the importance of securing that funding for continuity of education. I cannot promise a statement, but I will contact my hon. Friend and ask him to write to the hon. Lady with a response to the important issue that she just raised.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This Sunday a regular season National Football League American football game will be played at Wembley. During that game—*[Interruption.]* During that game, the NFL will honour our brave servicemen and women, and it is providing 500 free tickets for them. May we have a statement next week supporting that measure and encouraging other sporting events to do the same, and can we ensure that it is not on Monday. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the Leader of the House responds, I note that there is quite a lot of sedentary chuntering about the inappropriateness of the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) having a prop. On the whole, we discourage the use of props in the Chamber, but it is fine for the hon. Gentleman to hold the ball or even to put it down—but not to do anything violent with it.

Sir George Young: If I may say so, Mr Speaker, you have been very generous. I remember a debate on oranges, when an hon. Member produced an orange and was severely rebuked for so doing, as it had the potential to be an offensive weapon.

I think that that is a generous gesture by the NFL, and it should be commended. My hon. Friend may know that the all-party group on American football had its inaugural meeting yesterday and was, indeed, addressed by my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House, so I applaud the initiative and hope that it is a very successful game at Wembley stadium on Sunday.

Sir Alan Meale (Mansfield) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate before the Christmas recess on the Roma? Everyone in the House is aware of the alarming scenes that occurred yesterday at Dale Farm, and they have been viewed with despair by human rights organisations not only in the UK, but elsewhere. Will he also ask his colleagues in the appropriate Department whether they will take the issue with them into the presidency that we will shortly hold of the Council of Europe?

Sir George Young: I am not sure that the cause of the Roma was assisted by the scenes that took place yesterday; they may give a totally wrong impression to the one that the hon. Gentleman wants to give about the Roma community. There are provisions in the Localism Bill now going through the House to strengthen councils' powers to ensure that such scenes do not happen again, and there is £60 million over the spending review period to help councils and other registered providers provide more sites, but it is important that the law is upheld, and no one should be beyond the reach of it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Daylight Saving Bill, the Second Reading of which the House passed by 92 votes to 10 in December, has been held up for 10 months by the passage of its money resolution. The Bill is unable to make further progress until the Government table that resolution. Will the Leader of the House tell us when he intends it to be tabled so that the Bill can make further progress?

Sir George Young: I shall make some inquiries of the Treasury, whose consent would be needed for any money resolution, and when I have had that dialogue I will get back to my hon. Friend.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): When may we have a debate or statement on the situation in Yemen? As the Leader of the House knows, the Foreign Secretary has taken a resolution to the UN Security Council, and we are very grateful for that, but 94 children have now died, 300,000 people have been displaced and 30 schools in Sana'a are now occupied by the military. This is a political and humanitarian crisis. Please may we have a debate about it?

Sir George Young: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's concern that, following the President's return on 23 September, there would be renewed outbreaks of violence, and indeed there have been some very worrying incidents, with 110 people killed in clashes. We urge all parties to reach a consensus urgently on implementing a political settlement, leading to the formation of a national unity Government, the restoration of security and early elections. The right hon. Gentleman might like to ask the Backbench Business Committee whether it can hold a debate on that important issue.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Given that the international aid budget is now about £8 billion and will rise to £13 billion during this Parliament, given the fact that one of the worst aid crises ever seen is happening in east Africa, with a record-breaking British response, and given the fact that the Government are leading the world on international development, is it not time that the Department for International Development joined the departmental top table, starting with an hour-long International Development Question Time?

Sir George Young: That is an interesting proposition and we would like to have discussions through the usual channels to see whether there is an appetite for it. However, any lengthening of a session for one Department of necessity means reduced time for another, so I should like to reflect on the hon. Gentleman's proposition to see whether there is any flexibility.

Jim McGovern (Dundee West) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on the Sayce report and its potential impact on the Remploy organisation? The Remploy factory in my constituency has a first-class work force, and I am sure the same is true of its factories throughout the country. Such a debate would allow us to reach the right decision, which should be continued Government support for Remploy rather than unnecessarily throwing people on the dole.

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about Remploy. I cannot promise a debate, but he might like to apply to Mr Speaker for a debate in Westminster Hall, or to the Backbench Business Committee, so that we can spend more time on these important issues.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May we have a debate on the whipping of Back-Bench business, given that there is now a three-line Whip for those on the Government Benches, a three-line Whip for the Liberal Democrats, and, within the past 30 minutes, a three-line Whip for those on the Labour Benches? Is it any surprise that the British public are increasingly frustrated that this place is more out of touch than ever on the European question with regard to their own opinions?

Sir George Young: Whipping matters, happily, lie in the capable hands of my right hon. Friend the Patronage Secretary, but I say to my hon. Friend that nothing in the manifesto on which I stood mentioned an in or out referendum. We stood on a manifesto of being in Europe but not run by Europe.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester Central) (Lab): The Leader of the House has always been very helpful in trying to make sure that Ministers meet Members of this House, but may we have a statement on what is expected so that we can prevent the situation whereby a Minister in the other place said to one of my colleagues that he is rationing his exchanges with Members of Parliament and offered an official instead, which, I think the House would accept, is outrageous?

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern. The last time this was raised at business questions, I asked for a list of the Ministers who had declined to see hon. Members. I took it up with my colleagues, and I think we reached a resolution. I should like further details of the problems the hon. Gentleman mentions, and I will do what I can to resolve them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on political timing, in which I could try to persuade the Government why now is precisely the right time to hold a referendum on the European Union? It would give my right hon. Friend the opportunity to try to persuade me—in vain, I suspect—that a time when we are cutting domestic budgets is precisely the right time massively to increase our overseas aid budget.

Sir George Young: I think that my hon. Friend has rehearsed a speech that he might make on Monday if he succeeds in catching your eye, Mr Speaker.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): The Leader of the House will have heard some of the questions on the collapse of the carbon capture and storage scheme at Longannet on the River Forth. Will he arrange for a debate in the Chamber or a statement on carbon capture and storage? The scheme moved from the River Don, where it was decided not to place it, to the River Forth. I have visited the scheme, and it is technologically workable. The pipeline will always be there, but using the North sea makes it necessary to put a pipeline in, and that will cost money. Surely the Government must explain what they are doing about carbon capture and storage and what the involvement of the Scottish Government is.

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern. I have just re-read the speech that my right hon. Friend the Energy Secretary made yesterday, which contained a big chunk on precisely this issue. He confirmed that the £1 billion was still available, and a number of other schemes are eligible. We have therefore debated this recently, and we have just had Energy and Climate Change questions.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware of recent reports that the UK bioscience industry is returning to levels of economic activity not seen for quite some time, and should not this be the subject of a debate?

Sir George Young: I welcome the progress that is being made, and I am aware of my hon. Friend's academic background in this area. I understand that, according to Oxfordshire Bioscience Network, county firms in the field attracted £125 million of cash—80% of the total for the whole of the UK. I applaud the work the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is doing to promote this area of growth.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Earlier this week, the Luddites of Greenpeace achieved a judgment at the European Court of Justice disallowing the patenting of discoveries made where the basis was a human stem cell. This will put British science back for years and damage it enormously. It also increases the likelihood that people suffering from degenerative diseases will not get the cures they need in time. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on this incredibly important issue?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. There is a good leader in *The Times* today on this important subject asking what Greenpeace's interest is in this area of science. Speaking purely personally, I am in favour of research that enables one to treat and prevent degenerative diseases. I will certainly contact my right hon. Friends to see whether there is any action we can take in the light of this decision.

Nick de Bois (Enfield North) (Con): Lord Justice Scott Baker has now published his report into UK extradition arrangements, to which, worryingly, he seems to have given broad approval. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate so that this House can voice its opinion on the report and conclusions?

Sir George Young: I agree that it is an important report, and I understand the wide concern that exists. I cannot promise my hon. Friend a debate in the very near future, but he might like to try his luck with the Backbench Business Committee.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): We now know that the former Defence Secretary's private office and the permanent secretary knew that he was breaking the ministerial code. We are led to believe that the Cabinet Secretary and the Prime Minister did not know. May we have a statement on why they did not know and what action is going to be taken against the officials for not reporting this breach?

Sir George Young: We dealt with this at some length yesterday. The subject is covered by the Cabinet Secretary's report, which addresses the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman and comes up with recommendations to ensure that if there is a recurrence the necessary steps will be taken and the Cabinet Secretary and, if necessary, the Prime Minister will be notified.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Darent Valley hospital in my constituency labours under one of the first private finance initiative arrangements in the national health service. Could Government time be allocated to discuss how we might best help hospitals that are held back by PFI arrangements that have not exactly stood the test of time?

Sir George Young: In some cases, it has been possible to renegotiate PFI arrangements, obviously with agreement on both sides. I will draw the attention of my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary to this issue and see whether there is any role for the Department or, indeed, the Government to play in helping to reduce the burden on this trust.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Department for International Development is rightly putting more resources into countries such as Somalia and Pakistan. However, the Public Accounts Committee is concerned about increased financial investment where there are problems of corruption and governance or where DFID has reduced its administrative capacity. May we have a statement on DFID and financial management?

Sir George Young: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it clear that his Department has zero tolerance of fraud and abuse. My understanding is that some 82% of fraudulent payments are recovered and that new systems have been introduced since June last year to reduce the likelihood of payments going astray. I know that in due course the Government will want to respond to the PAC report.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): May we have a debate on the amount of investment by businesses in the UK? We have very good examples such as Airbus, Rolls-Royce and Jaguar Land Rover, but there are examples from right across the country. I would particularly like to highlight the tourism and food manufacturing sectors in my constituency.

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is important to keep a perspective on this. One tends to read disappointing news about closures, but that needs to be balanced by good news such as the investment of Jaguar Land Rover in Wolverhampton, strong order books at Airbus's plant at Broughton, and the announcement by PricewaterhouseCoopers of a £20 million investment in Belfast. I welcome what my hon. Friend has said about getting a balanced debate on these issues.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the Prime Minister's attitude to youth unemployment? Last week, the Prime Minister told me that the future jobs fund provided only phoney jobs. Since then, I have been inundated with young people getting in touch with me to tell me that they had found genuine employment through the future jobs fund. Does the Leader of the House agree that the Prime Minister should be a little more sensitive when talking about such matters?

Sir George Young: I am sure that the Prime Minister is always sensitive on issues such as youth unemployment, about which he cares deeply. The latest figures show that the number of 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training is falling. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome that. I hope that he will also welcome what we are doing with the Work programme to get people back into work.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): Inspired by the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) to the Prime Minister yesterday, may I ask for a debate on the regional growth fund and the new jobs that will be created by the first tranche of £450 million that has been conditionally allocated?

Sir George Young: I welcome what my hon. Friend says. I think that the Leader of the Opposition was rather dismissive of the regional growth fund yesterday. The first £450 million has been awarded on a conditional basis to 50 companies. That is expected to create 27,000 jobs directly and more than 100,000 indirectly through associated supply chains.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder whether I can persuade the Leader of the House to make this House even more relevant and to enhance its reputation by listening to the concerns of the people—mainly young people—who are clustered around St Paul's in the City, and by debating in this House the particular concern about the growing chasm between the super-rich who make up 1% or 2% of the population and the ordinary people of our country. It would surely show the relevance of this Chamber if we spoke directly to those concerns.

Sir George Young: I hope that the House does address those concerns when it debates the economy, youth unemployment and education. Having listened to some of those outside St Paul's, it does not seem to me that there is one coherent message. They have a range of objectives. Of course we should listen to them. It is a matter for the authorities of St Paul's how long this goes on, particularly if it is impeding access to the cathedral.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): There has been no consultation so far with Church and faith groups on the Government's proposals to introduce legislation for same-sex marriage. As the Leader of the House will know, the view of the Church of England on marriage

[Tony Baldry]

is that which has been approved by Parliament in the Act of Uniformity 1662 and which is set out in the Book of Common Prayer: that marriage is an act between a man and a woman. When determining the business of the House, will he ensure that there is sufficient time for sensitive and considered consultation with Church and faith groups on this issue? If the principle is one simply of equity, is it also the Government's proposal that different-sex couples will be able to enter into civil partnerships in church?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I commend the work he does as Church Commissioner in this House. Next week, my hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities will start a range of discussions, including with religious organisations, about the consultation document on equal marriage, which we plan to publish in March next year. That will address some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has spoken about. It is not the Government's intention to oblige religious organisations to carry out ceremonies with which they feel uncomfortable.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): May we have a debate on the new Tory thinking on benefits and pensions? It was reported yesterday in *The Daily Telegraph* that coalition Back Benchers sitting on the Public Accounts Committee have called explicitly for a further cut in the basic rate of state benefits that is used to calculate pensions. Given that Tory policy has created the current levels of inflation, will the Leader of the House comment on the new Tory thinking that wants to reduce the rate for benefits below the consumer prices index?

Sir George Young: The Government's position on benefits was set out in the Budget last June. We made it clear that benefits and pensions should be linked to CPI. We have made firm commitments on that basis. There will be an uprating statement later this year in the light of the latest CPI and retail prices index figures.

Mr James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): A few moments ago in response to a question, my right hon. Friend described Conservative policy in the last manifesto of being

"in Europe but not run by Europe."

He will remember a particular occasion on which he was standing for election, when he described himself as being somebody who was

"in the Conservative party, not run by the Conservative party."—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2009; Vol. 494, c. 619.]

Does he think that the same principle could usefully be applied to the Back-Bench business on Monday?

Sir George Young: I think that the quotation that my hon. Friend refers to was made during one of the speakership elections in which I stood—in fact, I think that I said it in both speakership elections. Had I been elected, I would of course have stood by that. However, on Monday I think that we need to consider what we said in our manifesto. As I have said, there was no commitment to an in or out referendum, but there was a commitment not to transfer any more powers to Brussels. We have secured the referendum lock. I hope that he will listen to the Foreign Secretary's speech on Monday and come to a conclusion in the light of the balance of the arguments.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Last week at business questions, I asked the Leader of the House about Crosby coastguard and the proposal by its staff to site the maritime operations centre there, which would save the Government a significant amount of money. His reply was that

"the Government are interested in all options that might save money".—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 488.]

I wonder whether he has had time to discuss this matter with his ministerial colleagues, and what the answer might be.

Sir George Young: Further to the hon. Gentleman's question last week, I raised this issue with Ministers at the Department for Transport, who will write to him shortly. I can confirm that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is considering all responses to the specific questions that were asked. Ministers will decide on a way forward very soon.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): During Prime Minister's questions yesterday, the Opposition levelled the accusation that large numbers of people had not registered for further education colleges this year as a result of the abolition of education maintenance allowance. As it happens, I spoke last week to the principal of the excellent Gloucestershire college in my constituency. He told me that it was true that registrations had fallen sharply this year, but his research had shown that that was the result of a substantial increase in the number of pupils staying on for sixth form at schools. He was dealing with the EMA issue using a judicious combination of the Government's new 16 to 19 bursary fund and the college's subsidy. Will the Leader of the House ask an education Minister to research this issue and confirm whether the accusation was inaccurate?

Sir George Young: The bursary fund will give £400 more than was available under EMA to the most vulnerable students. It is worth reminding the House that EMA was paid to 45% of 16 to 18-year-olds in further education or training. Only one in 10 of those people said it was necessary for their continued participation, so there was a lot of dead-weight in EMA. The new arrangements are much more realistically targeted, and those in the greatest need are getting more than they would have received under EMA.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister is in Cairo today making an announcement about £5 million of investment. With 49 people chasing every job vacancy in my constituency, 899 people under threat of redundancy at BAE Systems at Brough, and only two companies benefiting from the regional growth fund over the past 16 months, may we please have a debate in which the Deputy Prime Minister can announce to the House what investment he can offer to boost the economy in Yorkshire?

Sir George Young: I hope that the hon. Lady did not imply that the assistance that the Deputy Prime Minister has announced should not be given. I hope that she welcomes the increase in the budget of the Department for International Development. We had a debate on the economy last week in which there was an opportunity to raise these issues. She knows what we are doing through the Work programme, which is the most ambitious programme to get people back to work that we have ever seen. I hope that she will support the initiatives that will bring hope to people in her constituency.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Following Monday's short debate on Members' pensions, does the Leader of the House plan to make a statement about when he intends to sign the order transferring responsibility for our pensions to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for ever?

Sir George Young: I have signed the commencement order following the unanimous decision of the House on Monday to transfer responsibility for pensions to IPSA. IPSA now has responsibility for pensions, allowances and pay, and I think that that is the right place for all those things to be.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Public Bodies Bill has significant implications for Wales, and not least for the future of S4C. Does the Leader of the House acknowledge that the Government are riding roughshod over the concerns that remain by leaving only 24 hours to table amendments? They have made these changes in the full knowledge that most Welsh Members are at the Welsh Grand Committee in Wrexham and are unable to protest here today?

Sir George Young: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he has had two weeks in which to table amendments since the Bill came out of Committee. Only one amendment has been tabled. There is still adequate time for him to table amendments so that they can be considered on Tuesday.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Although I will defend for ever people's right to protest and demonstrate peacefully, the growing encampment outside St Paul's cathedral has residents who are clearly not available for work and should not be eligible for state benefits. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on what action the Government are taking to withdraw those benefits from people who are resident there?

Sir George Young: Everyone receiving benefits on the basis of unemployment, including people outside St Paul's, is required to be available for, and actively seek, work. They must show that they meet those conditions when they sign on. If they cannot do that and have no good reason for failing to comply, they face a complete loss of benefit.

Mr Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): There is ongoing concern in the House about the implications of the loss or misplacement of private documents in public places by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin). So that we can assess accurately the scale of the problem that we face, may we have a debate on the literacy levels of tramps in public parks?

Hon. Members: They are royal parks.

Sir George Young: Royal parks, yes.

I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that an appropriate rebuke was administered and I am sure there will be no repetition of the incident.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Tomorrow I will meet an international development charity in my constituency called Cord, which has been doing fantastic work over the past 40 years in conflict-affected and fragile states such as Chad and Cambodia. Will it be possible to provide Government time for a debate on the work of our international development charities in the UK and how we can support them further?

Sir George Young: I support the work that Cord is doing not just in the countries that my hon. Friend mentioned but in Burundi, where it is helping those affected by HIV. I know that many such organisations are supported by the Department for International Development, which has a particular fund for such initiatives. I would welcome such a debate, but I am afraid I cannot promise one in the very near future.

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): Next Tuesday, hundreds of young people and youth workers will lobby Parliament to save their youth services. Youth work is en route to being the first public service to disappear completely, and indeed in a number of places it already has. Please may we have an urgent debate in Government time on the disappearance of youth services?

Sir George Young: The youth service is an important service provided by county councils, and it is up to them to decide which of the resources that have been made available to them to put into it. Of course Ministers will be happy to respond to a lobby, but decisions on resource priorities are made by locally elected authorities.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): In my constituency we have a lot of manufacturing and engineering to celebrate, especially in the small and medium enterprise sector, but there would be more if we could just encourage banks to lend a little more to those firms. May we have some assurance that the credit easing that we are about to have really will reach those firms in a meaningful way?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend is right. Ever since the 1930s we have had the so-called Macmillan gap, which is the absence of secure capital funding for small and medium-sized enterprises. Other countries, such as the US, have bonds that are available to small companies. Credit easing, more details of which will be available in the autumn statement, has as its objective not just helping SMEs to provide growth and employment but creating a new market in capital for them by possibly generating a new market in bonds.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Six hundred and fifty young people from all parts of the world were stunned by the sudden closure of the TASMAC London business school. Many of them had been asked to pay up front their fees not just for one year but for the full three years, and the company has now sought to go into liquidation. I have asked for an urgent meeting with the Minister for Immigration, because the Home Office

[Barry Gardiner]

insists that those young people have only 60 days to find a new course, pay new fees and establish their credibility as students in this country again. They have been victims of what many believe to be a serious fraud, and the Government need to treat them as such. Will the Leader of the House ensure that that will be done?

Sir George Young: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will support the Home Office's work to close down bogus colleges. I have great sympathy with those who find themselves in the position he describes, and I will contact my hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration to see whether there is any flexibility in the situation.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate, or an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Education, on schools' capital funding? On the one hand the Secretary of State is supporting the setting up of a free school in Runcorn, but on the other many schools in Runcorn and Halton need capital investment, particularly the outstanding Heath school. That would have been taken care of under the previous Government's Building Schools for the Future programme. May we have an urgent statement on the schools capital project?

Sir George Young: We had questions to Department for Education Ministers earlier this week. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was able to take part. I will certainly raise the issue with the Secretary of State and see whether we can make any progress.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the Leader of the House and colleagues, because 45 Back Benchers got in in 41 minutes. It was great economy by Back and Front Benchers alike.

National Planning Policy Framework

[Relevant documents: Uncorrected evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, Sustainable development in the National Planning Policy Framework, HC 1480-i; and uncorrected oral evidence to the Communities and Local Government Committee, National Planning Policy Framework, HC 1526-i, with written evidence published by the Committee on the internet and HC 1526-ii.]

12.25 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Greg Clark): I beg to move,

> That this House has considered the matter of the National Planning Policy Framework.

It is a pleasure to be able to discuss our draft national planning policy framework and to hear the contributions of Members from all parties.

I welcome the new shadow Secretary of State to our exchanges for the first time. He is the third shadow Communities Secretary in a year, and we hope he will be around a little longer than his predecessors. He is a regular fixture on Thursdays, and I know he will be much missed in business questions, but we are looking forward to his contributions over the months ahead. May I also recognise the contribution of the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint)? As we all know, she is a doughty political fighter and quite a political pugilist, but she has approached planning issues with a desire to find common ground and a pragmatism appropriate to the issue.

Planning transcends the life of any one Government and builds the foundation on which future generations will live their lives. That is why it is so important, and why we should take the opportunity to put in place a planning system that ensures that the countryside is available in the future for our children and their children as it is for us, that they have decent homes to grow up in and that they live in places that are safe and encouraging rather than threatening and miserable. Those are the purposes of the planning system, and it is important that we have a shared perspective on them.

Today's debate comes from a commitment that I made to this House and the other place when we published the draft national planning policy framework in July. I think it is right to have Parliament debate the proposals, and we have all afternoon for the debate so that the many Members present can put their views and their constituents' views on the record. The same debate will be held in the House of Lords in the week ahead, and of course the debates follow a 12-week consultation period that closed this week. There have been vigorous contributions from all sides—never has planning policy been so popular an issue for debate. Despite what people might think, I welcome that, because it is of prime importance and should be discussed in the open rather than the preserve of specialists. The idea that planning policy statements should simply appear having been discussed behind closed doors, rather than engaging people, is the wrong one. Scrutiny of them is a good thing.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It is absolutely right that we have an open and transparent debate. Will the Minister therefore explain in his speech the funds given to the Conservative party by property developers, and the secret meetings and breakfast meetings with them? What influence did they have on the drafting of the draft framework?

Greg Clark: I am very disappointed that the hon. Gentleman has taken that line. Property developers had no influence whatever on our draft policy framework.

Let me say something about the consultation in which we are engaged. The consultation closed on Monday, as Members will know. It would be neither fair nor legal for me to pre-empt the decisions that we will make in responding to the more than 10,000 responses that we received, as I am sure hon. Members will appreciate. Members might come up with brilliant suggestions and ideas in this afternoon's debate, either by themselves or on behalf of their constituents, but I will be constrained from saying, "I agree with you; we'll put it in," or, "We're minded to do that," because that would prejudice our consideration of all the responses. Given that the consultation closed on Monday, Members will not be surprised to hear that I have not yet had time to review all the responses.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Let me say in a supportive way that we could have all the consultation in the world, but at the end of the day Ministers have to be brave, and that goes for every Minister I have known in my 30 years in this House. On the one hand, people want to protect their environment. On the other, 7 million people in this country need to be in decent housing, and there would be £2.5 billion-worth of infrastructure ready to be built—even for energy from waste—if the Government gave the go-ahead.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but it is important to tackle the fundamentals. That is why, following our commitment to review the planning framework, our analysis was that it needed a fundamental review, even though it would have been easy simply to tinker with it and make minor changes. That is why we have made the proposals that we have and why I wanted the fullest possible consideration. We will take all representations into account. I am convinced that we will have a planning system that everyone in this Chamber can be proud of, and that we will take this opportunity to create a planning system that offers future generations better prospects.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab) *rose—*

Greg Clark: Let me make some progress, and then I will of course give way to hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber.

Let me set out the reasons for our reforms in context, which relates to the point that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) raised. The first and overriding objective is to put power in the hands of local people. Over the years, we developed arrangements in this country—most recently through the regional strategies—that sought to resolve issues outside what people thought of as their communities. I understand the reasons for that and I do not think that those efforts were ill-intentioned by any means. However, the consequence has been that many people in this country feel that planning is something that is done to them, rather than something that involves them. I am not alone in saying that: the problem was also recognised in our discussions in Committee on the Localism Bill. The last planning Minister in the previous Government, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) said:

> "I inherited the regional spatial strategies and quickly found that they had…few friends…what was clear to me…was that our regional spatial strategies and our approach to planning…was too top-down".—[*Official Report*, 30 June 2010; Vol. 512, c. 272WH.]

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): This is really about definitions. I asked the Prime Minister a question about that, and he said that the measures were about giving power to local people, but does the Minister think that local people and local authorities are the same thing? These measures will give power to local authorities and planning committees, not to local people.

Greg Clark: I am pleased that the hon. Lady has raised that point. We are indeed giving power to local councils, which are the democratically elected representatives of local people. We are also scrapping the regional strategies that impose decisions on them. Crucially, however, the Localism Bill—many Members participated in the debates on it—creates the legal right to a neighbourhood plan in any parish, town or neighbourhood below the local authority level. It is absolutely right that neighbourhoods should have that ability, which is part of our reforms.

Bill Esterson: My constituents have similar concerns to those of my hon. Friends about the Bill's impact. The biggest issue in my constituency is protection of the green belt. I am sure that the Minister is aware of the legal opinion obtained by the Campaign to Protect Rural England, which says that green-belt policy

> "could be undermined by the sustainable development presumption together with the expectation that applications should be approved unless there are adverse impacts to policies in the NPPF as a whole."

I hope that he will take that opinion on board, or does he have an alternative legal opinion that counters what the CPRE has said?

Greg Clark: I will address that point explicitly later in my remarks. I might just say, however, that the hon. Gentleman's predecessor in Sunderland—

Bill Esterson *indicated dissent.*

Greg Clark: I do apologise; the hon. Gentleman is from Sefton. I will therefore not make the point that I intended to.

Let me continue the point about the importance of putting local people in charge. The British people are a pretty bolshie lot, and when we feel that we are being dictated to from above, the natural response is to seek to frustrate, thwart, resist and impede whatever is being imposed without enjoying the consent of the community. We know from this country and around the world that it is good practice to involve people in plan-making early and to allow them a genuine say in producing plans for their area, because then they will participate with enthusiasm. People are right to resist when bad

[Greg Clark]

planning is done to them, but when good planning is done with them, they will prefer to get involved and create positive places. That is why we are scrapping the regional strategies and the right of the Planning Inspectorate to rewrite local plans and why we are introducing compulsory pre-application scrutiny for major developments and neighbourhood plans to ensure a local voice.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Local decisions by local councils are important, but may I draw the Minister's attention to what has happened in my constituency within 48 hours of the consultation closing? The neighbouring local authority, Tendring, decided to allocate land for about 3,000 houses immediately adjacent to the borough boundary with Colchester, 2 miles away from the nearest community in Tendring. In other words, our neighbouring authority is putting its housing on Colchester's doorstep. Who will make the decision there?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend will understand that planning Ministers cannot comment on specific situations such as the one that he raises, for reasons that he knows. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck) also knows perfectly well why that is not possible. However, over the years there have been examples of precisely such situations, which is why the Localism Bill will impose a legal duty on neighbouring authorities and other public bodies to co-operate, so that both authorities take into account the consequences for the neighbouring area's infrastructure. That is an important test in the Localism Bill—indeed, it was strengthened by consensus with the Opposition—that will provide the kind of general protections that my hon. Friend seeks.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Greg Clark: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) and then make some progress.

Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): I thank the Minister for everything that he is saying about delivering localism in planning, for which those of us on the Government Benches have campaigned over many years. We are therefore pleased to see it happening. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that the reason we have to make such fundamental changes is that the system we inherited was not fit for purpose? The top-down approach did not work, which is why we did not have the sustainable development that we should have had during the 13 years of the Labour Government.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right, and that is now a shared view. As I have said, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne has said that. Indeed, in our conversations about the Localism Bill, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), whom I congratulate on his promotion, also recognised that the regional approach would go and not come back. It has not worked for the reasons that I have mentioned: it sets people against the planning system.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) *rose—*

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab) *rose—*

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC) *rose—*

Greg Clark: I want to make some progress, because lots of Members want to speak and I do not want to take up too much time. However, I will take some interventions a little later.

The first objective is to make the local plan central to what happens and to transfer power to local communities. That has to be crucial. However, if we are to put local councils and people in neighbourhoods in charge, it is essential that the policy context in which they operate is accessible. They have to be able to understand it. When I first started to review the planning policy statements and planning policy guidance notes over a year ago, I asked for them to be brought into my office. They had to be carried in—in boxes. It is not possible to put local councils and members in charge if they have to wade through more than 1,000 pages of national policy. The policy has accreted over time. It was not the intention of the previous Government or Governments before them to accumulate such a mountain of policy; it has grown up piecemeal over time. That is why—to respond to the hon. Member for Huddersfield, who has now left the Chamber—it was important to take the issue seriously and review the policy from first principles. That is what we have done to make it accessible. The proposals that we have received to boil it down and distil it reflect a consensus in the House and beyond. In the submissions that have come in from the groups outside the House, I have seen many detailed "track changes" comments, and none of the proposals departs significantly from the type and length of document that we are aiming for.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on having elevated the debate on planning policy, which is vital for the economic future of the country. May I also tell him, however, that all those who work in the planning system now need certainty? Will he move on as quickly as possible from the consultation to provide a definitive national planning policy framework, to give us that certainty?

Greg Clark: I will, and I will have more to say about that shortly.

Derek Twigg *rose—*

Greg Clark: I want to make some progress, because this is principally an opportunity for colleagues to make speeches and contributions to the consultation.

We need to make planning policy accessible if we are to achieve our aim of putting local communities in charge. That is the purpose of our reforms. It is also important to consider the effects of the policy regime that we have established. I do not pretend that the planning system is the only factor behind the low levels of house building and the difficulties in commercial development that we have at the moment. That would clearly be wrong. There are also difficulties in accessing finance, for example; there is a shared recognition that that is an important factor at this time. It is important to recognise, however, that the planning system makes an important contribution.

I have been looking at the joint submission from Shelter, Crisis, Homeless Link, the National Housing Federation—representing social housing providers—and the Chartered Institute of Housing. It says that

> "reducing the quantity of policy will help simplify the planning system, make it more accessible to all users and will remove a significant barrier to much needed development"

—in this case, in social housing. Recent statistics show that in the five years to 2010, real spending on planning, through planning applications, increased by 13%, while the number of applications fell by 32%. By my reckoning, that means that the average cost has risen by something like 66%. That is a factor.

Mr Raynsford *rose—*

Greg Clark: May I just finish this point?

The British Chambers of Commerce has said that the system is

> "too complicated, too costly and too uncertain. It creates mistrust…and holds back our recovery."

With that breadth of analysis, it is important to recognise that the planning system is one of the factors that is leading to the silting up of the system.

Mr Raynsford: Does the Minister not recognise that, if he takes the period of five years from 2005 to 2010, which embraced the last two years of the boom before the crash and the three years of recession, he will inevitably get some pretty distorted outcomes? That is not a fair parallel. Does he also accept that, in 2007, the last year before the recession, the figure of 207,000 net additions to new housing was the highest for 20 years? It is therefore completely nonsensical of him to say that the previous system was not capable of delivering new housing.

Greg Clark: It will be obvious to the right hon. Gentleman that I am taking a long-term view. I have said explicitly that the faults that I have diagnosed relate to the long term, but he chooses to cite particular years. Looking at the whole life of the previous Government, from 1998 to 2010, the number of homes built and completed in England was lower than under any previous Government since the war. He is therefore alone in thinking that there is not a problem, and that we do not have a lower level of house building than is appropriate.

Let me outline the consequences of the problem for families. If we persist, over the long term, in building a far lower number of homes than the number of households that are being formed, the inevitable consequence will be poverty. People will have to spend more in rent and have less to spend on their children. It will also be more difficult for people to get on to the housing ladder for the first time. We know that the average age for first-time buyers who do not have assistance from their parents is now getting close to middle age, at nearly 40. We want people to be able to get on; we do not want them to have to make choices.

I received an e-mail from a member of the public, which stated:

> "Being part of a couple with a 2-year-old son, living in a flat…we are desperate to buy a family home with a garden, but have little chance.
>
> The social consequences of house prices being so high seem catastrophic to me—both parents being fixated on earning enough to pay for a mortgage, both too"—

the next word might be unparliamentary—

> "for much of a social life, every…penny going on the mortgage with nothing left over for holidays that I took for granted as a child. We are currently having to decide whether to abandon our families and friends and go and live…where neither of us has lived before…or to stay in our flat, with our son unable to run around without the people underneath us banging on the ceiling!"

There is a problem for families that we need to address by changing the system and dealing with some of the long-term flaws. That is the purpose of this policy.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I am with the Minister when it comes to abolishing the regional spatial strategies. They were authoritarian and anti-democratic in just apportioning numbers of houses to particular regions. I have concerns about the proposals, however. One of the factors in helping urban regeneration and the renaissance of our cities has been the prioritisation of brownfield land over greenfield land. The Minister is talking about poverty and the creation of new households, but those problems have to be dealt with in our cities. I am worried that his proposals will lead not to green-belt development but to green-land development at the expense of our cities. Will he comment on that?

Greg Clark: Of course I will. Let me turn to some of the concerns that have been raised, of which that is one. I shall preface that by saying that it is not our intention to change the purpose of the planning system. There has been some suggestion that the proposals represent a fundamental change in what the system is about, but they do not. They will, quite rightly, balance the environmental, the social and the economic, and there is no change in that regard, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has declared.

Let me turn to some of the concerns that have been expressed, including the definition of brownfield sites that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned. It is true that the draft national planning policy framework does not use the words "brownfield sites". However, that is not for the reasons that have been imputed to us. The reasons are rather more prosaic. Many Members will have participated in debates during the previous Parliament in which we discussed the fact that it was being presumed that gardens that had ended up being included in the brownfield definition were available to be developed. One of the first things that we did was to take them out of the definition.

Natascha Engel *rose—*

Greg Clark: I am responding to the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer).

In the draft framework, we decided not to use what had been quite a crude definition. Another example—something that I did not know before—is that a china clay quarry in Cornwall apparently falls outside the definition of a brownfield site. Paragraph 165 of the national planning policy framework therefore contains a requirement on councils to allocate land of the lowest environmental value. That was suggested by the environmental charities. There have been representations to say that some strictly brownfield land that has been developed has, over the years, been put back into use to support nature, especially in our cities. That was the reason behind having a more environmentally based definition.

[Greg Clark]

Without pre-empting the consultation, which would clearly be wrong, let me say that there have been suggestions that, because some people have got used to the word "brownfield", they might appreciate some reference—some explanation—that links the policy to that. That is a representation that has been made, and given that it is our intention, for all the reasons that the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton suggests, to ensure that we bring back into use first land that has been derelict or previously developed and that makes a lesser contribution than green fields, that will be made absolutely clear when we respond.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): The planning framework also requires local authorities to bring forward an additional 20% spare land beyond the sites required to meet their five-year housing supply, so it is entirely possible that one sixth of all the land made available in the plan is not developed, while the rest of it is developed. We could therefore see development on land that is certainly not of the least environmental value.

Greg Clark: It is the Government's clear intention that it should be the case, as it is a requirement to bring forward land of the least environmental value, but let me comment on my hon. Friend's point about the sixth year, as it were. If we are putting local plans first and genuinely want a local plan that is sovereign and determines what will happen for the future life of a community, it must be deliverable, sound and accurate. What is known empirically across the country is that not every piece of land that is allocated turns out to be capable of development in the way anticipated. Sometimes there can be fewer homes developed on a site than originally thought, with an allocation for six or seven homes ending up with only four or five, for various reasons—perhaps a tree is subject to a tree preservation order, for example. There is always some fallout. The proposal in the consultation suggests that if we are to plan for the number of homes that are really needed—there is no longer any number being handed down from above—we have to anticipate some drop-off, so a buffer is necessary. It is not a requirement to build any more homes than needed; the purpose is simply to make the plan as accurate as it can be.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) *rose—*

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con) *rose—*

Greg Clark: I want to make some progress, as I want Members to able to contribute to the debate. Let me deal with a couple of important issues that have been raised about the definition of sustainability.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) *rose—*

Greg Clark: I will give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Mr Betts: Let me ask the Minister about the issue of 20%, as it is important to the context of building on land where that building will have the least environmental damage. If there is an extra 20%, will local authorities be able to prioritise which sites should be developed first within the 120% requirement? If not, it will be open to developers to cherry pick which sites they build on and it will be the land associated with the least environmental damage that will be left behind, as they will be the hardest sites to build on, while the greenfield sites will be built on first.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point; it is exactly the intention that councils should be able to prioritise and to bring forward the lowest environmentally valuable sites first. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

Natascha Engel *rose—*

Greg Clark: I want to make some progress, and the hon. Lady intervened earlier.

Let me say something about the definition of sustainability, which I know has attracted some interest. The definition that we have used is the one used by previous Governments. It is the Brundtland commission's definition, which has stood the test of time. It has been suggested that it is a high-level definition, so there should be a further elaboration of it. Hon. Members will know that planning policy statement 1, for example, contains the Brundtland definition in one paragraph and includes an extra 10 lines referring to the sustainable development strategy. That has been part of the previous document and some organisations and perhaps some Members have suggested that we should make reference to the current version of the sustainable development strategy, the 2005 document.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It appears that rumours are circulating that Colonel Gaddafi has been captured. If that is true, will you ask a Secretary of State or a Minister to make a statement to the House today?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): What I can say is that it is up to the Secretary of State to decide whether to make a statement. The point has been noted and everybody is aware of it. Has the Minister finished?

Greg Clark: That was more hope than expectation, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will finish shortly. I did not think anything more interesting would happen today than our discussion of the national planning policy framework, but I was clearly mistaken.

The Government have not revoked the sustainable development strategy of 2005. Members of the Environmental Audit Committee who interviewed me last week asked some questions about it and it is the subject of one of the suggestions that have been made in the consultation. Let me explain why it was not included in the draft as it stands. As I say, it has not been revoked or repealed in any way. It is simply a matter of whether a document produced in 2005 has the timelessness of the Brundtland definition.

It was necessary to update the 1999 strategy in 2005. Six years on, there are some respects in which thinking on sustainability has progressed. For example, there is the idea that the separate pillars of the economy, the environment and the social aspects of sustainability can be traded off, one against the other. Some people argue—and I think there is some merit in doing so—that that is a rather defensive position and that one should be looking for positive improvements to the environment, not simply to trade-off. That is very much the thinking in the Government's natural environment White Paper, which talked of a net gain for nature. In response to the consultation we could listen to such representations, but let me say simply that our intention was to make sure that we are not stranded in our thinking when we might have a more progressive approach to sustainability.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab) *rose—*

Caroline Lucas *rose—*

Greg Clark: I am not taking any more interventions, as Mr Deputy Speaker has indicated that he thinks I have spoken for long enough.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It was the Minister himself, not me, who said that he would be brief in order to allow Back Benchers to contribute. The Minister may carry on.

Greg Clark: You are correct and punctilious, Mr Deputy Speaker, in holding me to my commitment.

Let me deal with another issue of concern—transitional arrangements.

Derek Twigg *rose—*

Greg Clark: I am taking no more interventions.

It follows from everything I have said about the purpose of these reforms, which is to advantage local plan-making by putting local communities in charge rather than have planning dealt with by appeal through the planning inspectorate, that in the transitional arrangements we will put in place—again, in response to the consultation; we have had many representations on what they should be—we will be clear that no local council or authority that has developed a plan that expresses the future of its community will be at all disadvantaged. We are not going to take decision making from them. Part of the transitional arrangements will ensure that the community is advantaged rather than disadvantaged from the outset. It would pre-empt the consultation if I were to say which suggested approaches we favour, but I make the commitment to the House that we will safeguard and strengthen the ability of local councils to be in charge of their own destiny rather than the reverse.

As was recognised by the hon. Member for Huddersfield, this debate has provided an opportunity for every Member to participate in the reform of a planning system that, over time, had lost its capability of delivering its purpose of planning for communities in a way that we all want. The reforms are necessary to make sure that we have an environment that our future generations can cherish as we do. It is important to give voices to people in communities and, for all the reasons I mentioned about sustainability, it is important to improve and enhance our environment and to restore habitats where we can do so. We also want to improve the standards of design, which have turned many people against development. We also want, of course, to deliver the jobs and homes that the next generation needs, but not at the expense of these important aspects of the environment that we cherish.

I look forward to hearing the contributions of hon. Members this afternoon and to reading all the responses to the consultation that have been made. At the end of this process, I say to every hon. Member, we will have a planning system that reflects the best endeavours and the best intentions of everyone who wants to contribute positively to this process. It will be something of which we can be proud for future generations.

12.59 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Like the Minister, I would like to express my appreciation to my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). I thank her and my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for their work on the Opposition Front Bench in holding the Government to account. I also welcome my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and for City of Durham (Roberta Blackman-Woods) to the shadow Department for Communities and Local Government team. Alongside them, and on either side of me today, we have continuity in the form of my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and for Derby North (Chris Williamson).

I welcome today's debate. I am sorry that the Secretary of State did not open it—although he has done us the courtesy of attending—because given that he is seeking, with the Minister, to make the most fundamental change to our planning system for more than two generations and given that this is the first opportunity for the House to debate the matter since the publication of the national planning policy framework, it would have been good to hear from him. I look forward to the next occasion. Nevertheless, this debate, which we welcome, is extremely timely. The Minister expressed it well: planning at times and to some people can seem rather technical, but in fact it is about how we shape the places in which we live and how we build our communities. That is what Civic Voice has described as "everyday England".

We know that there is a finite quantity of land. As Mark Twain famously said,

"buy land because they've stopped making it".

There are many competing demands on land. England is a very densely populated country, and the population is growing. The planning system's job is to help us to meet our future needs for housing, jobs, economic development, transport, growing food, tackling climate change and generating energy in a way that balances all these things—the right sort of development in the right place, which, in the end, is what we all want—while protecting the natural environment, by which I mean the moors and the mountains, the rivers and the lakes, the green fields and the countryside that make up our islands' unique and beautiful landscapes. They matter because we cherish their beauty and their capacity to lift our spirits and because, as human beings have belatedly learned, they sustain our very existence. We need planning to protect this environment because, in the absence of that balance and if we fail to reconcile

"competing economic, social and environmental priorities"—

in the words of the Conservative planning Green Paper—there would be a free-for-all.

I welcome the idea of simplification and the principle of greater clarity, and I support enabling planning decisions to be taken as near as possible to those whom

[Hilary Benn]

they will affect. It was, after all, a Labour Government who introduced the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, which helped local councils to designate green belt. However, the central problem raised by the draft NPPF and the reason the Government are in difficulty is that Ministers have failed so far to convince people that they have got this balance right. It seems that even Conservative-controlled Tunbridge Wells borough council, which is the Minister's own local authority, is unhappy about his reforms. It is reported that the council "strongly disagreed" with the Government's suggestion that the NPPF had the right approach towards sustainable development—I shall return to that point—and argued that it was

"vague and open to interpretation".

The council also strongly disagreed that green belt would be protected under the NPPF. People are entitled to ask, if the Minister is having difficulty persuading his own Conservative-controlled council to support his plans, how anybody else can be expected to have confidence in them.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): We are fortunate in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent to have a robust local core spatial plan. I do not know whether that applies to Tunbridge Wells, but much of the country does not have such a plan. Is there a case for arguing that the Government should take a considered pause in the implementation of the framework and resource councils sufficiently so that they can put local plans in place?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I shall come to it later because it is fundamental to the likelihood of what the Government say that they want to achieve—few would disagree with the ambition—actually happening, given the nature of the framework and the issues with its implementation.

Alok Sharma: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman agrees with much of what my right hon. Friend the Minister has said. The right hon. Gentleman is implying that there was a golden age of sustainable planning under the Labour party, but clearly that was not the case. Does he agree that reducing the planning policy document from 1,000 pages to fewer than 100 pages will be good news for encouraging what we all want to see—more sustainable development in this country?

Hilary Benn: The planning policy that we all inherited had great strengths and evolved over time. My concern is that, as was argued by others during the consultations, in reducing the amount of guidance, we might end up not with greater clarity, but with greater uncertainty. In the end, all words will be argued over by developers, considered by local authorities and ultimately determined by the courts.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman seems to be indicating that he favours the previous Labour Government's approach of the regional spatial strategy. Is that Labour party policy?

Hilary Benn: I am interested that the hon. Gentleman reads that into my remarks. I shall say something about that in a moment. The RSS had its strengths but also its weaknesses, and we have to be perfectly honest about that.

Natascha Engel: I want to return to the point about confusion in the Government's message. Does my right hon. Friend think that it would help if, when people asked the Government about greenfields, they did not respond by talking about green belt? They are completely different.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend makes an extremely powerful point. Such responses created considerable concern while the NPPF was being considered.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is most unfortunate that my Labour-led borough council in Broxtowe has not only accepted the RSS target figure of 6,000 new houses, which means that 4,000 houses will be built on my green belt in Broxtowe, but is not waiting for the Localism Bill or the framework, which will protect the green belt? Will he speak to the Labour party in Broxtowe, urge it to pause and accept the Localism Bill and abandon the RSS targets that his Government laid down?

Hilary Benn: It sounds like the hon. Lady is describing localism in action. If the Government say that local councils should be able to take their own decisions—that point was made forcefully by the Minister—Government Members should accept that as a way of proceeding.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Hilary Benn: I am going to make a little more progress.

The ham-fisted way in which aspects of planning policy have been handled by the Government has been entirely of their own making: parts of the policy were drafted in a rush; they did not listen properly to advice; they have created uncertainty—hence the result of the consultation and the need for clarity—and, most disappointingly of all, they responded initially to criticism with retaliation. That is quite some achievement. In this respect, as in others, the Government cannot help going too far, too fast.

The Government have got themselves into this position partly because of the difficulties with their economic policy, which is central to planning reform. Everyone can now see confidence plummeting, unemployment rising, growth grinding to a halt and nothing like enough private sector jobs being created to replace those being lost in the public sector, even though we were promised last year that that was what would happen. Worst of all, however, in the face of this failure, the Government have no plan to put it right. There are some in government, not so much in DCLG but elsewhere, who have blamed the planning system for a lack of growth, even though, over the past 60 years—to respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma)—it has helped our country to build many new homes, to establish many new businesses and shops and to undertake a great deal of development.

No one is going to say that the planning system is perfect or that it cannot be improved upon—decisions could certainly be made quicker. However, given that the Government's own impact assessment makes it clear that 85% of planning applications were approved in 2009-10, it is hard to see how it can be described as a system that stands in the way of economic growth. What worries people when they read the NPPF is the possibility that it will usher in a "big bang" development free-for-all, which no one in the House would want.

Derek Twigg: The Government did not explain exactly what they meant by giving communities a greater say. Most of my constituents who have written to me on the subject fear that they will actually give business a greater say. One of my constituents asked, "Would what the Government are doing have stopped the housing development down the road to which I objected?" Will the Government be giving communities more power to stop development? Most people who contact me want to stop it rather than support it. Are the Government creating a smokescreen by saying that they will give communities a greater say, rather than actually giving them greater power to determine the outcome of applications?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. There are those who think that neighbourhood planning will give them the opportunity to reduce the number of houses planned for the areas in which they live—this takes us back to the point made by the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—but I understand from the NPPF that it is a one-way lock. A neighbourhood plan cannot say, "We would like to have fewer houses than proposed by the local plan"; it can only say, "We would like to have more houses". People who have seen neighbourhood planning as a potential way of doing what the hon. Lady wants to be done will find themselves rather disappointed.

Under the current system—I want to recognise its strengths—councils have granted developers planning permission for 300,000 new homes that have not yet been built. Why have they not been built? It is clearly not the fault of the planning system, which has done its bit. What are the Government doing about the fact that the number of new homes built in England in the first year under the coalition was the lowest for at least 20 years, and about the fact that plans for 200,000 new homes have been abandoned since their election because of the chaos and uncertainty created by their planning proposals? That is but one example of the way in which the Government's draft framework is leading to confusion.

The Government hope that planning reform will help growth to get going again, and we all want that. However, their actions in rushing reform in a way that has lost people's confidence and hurrying to try to abolish the regional spatial strategies have led to uncertainty among planners, councils, developers and the courts. As a result, the system may slow down while everyone works out what the new words mean.

Bill Esterson: I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees that retaining the "brownfield first" policy, under which the proportion of property built on brownfield increased between 1989 and 2010, is the answer to many of the current problems. It would, for instance, solve the problem raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), whether it applied to green belt or greenfield. Does he think that one of the reasons for its absence is the attachment of developers—who, in my constituency, have been buying up land in both green belt and greenfield—to the Conservative party?

Hilary Benn: The developers must speak for themselves, but I cannot understand why the Government have abandoned what was a very successful "brownfield first" policy. The fact that they have done so has raised public concerns.

Public confidence is very important. We all accept that the planning system needs public support in order to work. Let me say, with all respect, that describing those who have expressed genuine concerns about the draft NPPF, including such well-known revolutionaries and radicals as the National Trust—I suppose that I should declare my membership of that radical and revolutionary organisation, as should other right hon. and hon. Members—as "semi-hysterical", "left wing" and guilty of "nihilistic selfishness" was a profound mistake on the part of Ministers. Even worse was the accusation that the criticism was

"a carefully choreographed smear campaign".

What were Ministers thinking of? Is it because they are so out of touch that, instead of listening and responding to what people were saying—as, in fairness, the Minister has today—they chose initially to attack while bulldozing onwards? That is the very opposite of what the public expect in the way of balanced discussion and proper consultation.

Nor, as the Minister knows, are the accusations true. For example, both the National Trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England have supported housing development, in some cases on greenfield land, because they thought that it was the right thing to do. This is not about people who want no development at all; it is about the Government's recognition that the way in which they approached the matter at the outset was a mistake. We need only look at the size of the petitions that have been received to see the extent of the concern that is felt. It is fair to say that recently, including today, we have observed a more emollient tone, and I for one welcome that; but it is not before time.

It is clear that, having gone about this in the wrong way to start with, the Government will have to make some big changes in the right direction. Paragraph 14 of the NPPF contains the

"presumption in favour of sustainable development"

that was originally announced in the Chancellor's "The Plan for Growth" in March, which also used a phrase—

"the default answer to development is 'yes'"

—that is repeated in paragraph 19 of the NPPF. That has created a lot of anxiety, because it suggests decision-making that is automatic rather than considered and because, in the words of the National Trust, it constructs "a fundamentally unbalanced system".

Caroline Lucas: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the

"presumption in favour of sustainable development"

will make it considerably harder to refuse environmentally damaging development, even when it harms sites of special scientific interest? Would it not be helpful for the Government to say today that they would rule out planning for any kind of development on SSSIs?

Hilary Benn: That point has been raised by a number of organisations in response to the consultation, and I shall put a specific point to the Minister about it shortly.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I have given way a number of times already, and I am anxious to make progress.

Given the primacy of the sustainable development presumption in policy, given that so much flows from it, and given that no one in the House wants development at any price, the Government need to get the definition of sustainable development right. The Environmental Audit Committee has already made clear its view on which definition should be used. As the Minister will know, in a report published in March, it called for the inclusion of the five internationally recognised principles of sustainable development that were set out in the 2005 sustainable development strategy, which, as I recall, the then Opposition supported at the time, as I do now.

I listened carefully to the argument presented by the Minister today, and I hope that the Government will bear it in mind when they produce their revised draft, because there is a risk that in the absence of a complete definition, there will be more argument about what the term means. The last Government, with support from the then Opposition, replaced the original Brundtland definition with the 2005 definition, and I was not persuaded by what the Minister said about why that should not endure in time. If we stick with it, it will be well understood and enduring.

Mr Raynsford: I strongly agree with what my right hon. Friend is saying. Does he agree with me that it is necessary not only to have a proper and full definition of sustainable development, but to establish a link between it and the operational principles that govern the handling of planning applications? That point was made very well by the Town and Country Planning Association in its submission. The absence of operational principles allowing implementation of the overall definition is one of the greatest weaknesses of the current NPPF draft.

Hilary Benn: I agree with my right hon. Friend. I am sure that the revised draft will be a slightly longer document, but the existence of a bit more material sometimes assists decisions in the planning process rather than making them more difficult.

I do not know whether the Minister has seen the CPRE legal opinion, issued by a respected planning QC, but it addresses this very point about the definition of sustainable development. The QC argues that

> "there is an ambiguity which permeates the NPPF, and which is likely to lead to uncertainty in its application, with a consequent increase in the number of appeals."

None of us wants that. This serves as a powerful argument that the Minister should reflect on possible changes, as he has undertaken to do.

Mark Pawsey: The issue of sustainable development comes into play only in the absence of a local plan. Does the right hon. Gentleman therefore agree that Government and Opposition should come together to encourage local authorities to get their local plan in place early?

Hilary Benn: The NPPF says that in the absence of such a plan there should be a presumption in favour of sustainable development, but regardless of whether there is a local plan, someone must still decide about what constitutes sustainable development.

The second issue I want to address is the choice of land for development. There are many competing pressures, and we want to protect as much green space as possible. That point was made eloquently in this week's Westminster Hall debate initiated by the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry).

Because of our heritage, we have a lot of previously developed brownfield land and, building on the foundations laid by a previous Conservative Government, Lord Prescott created the "brownfield first" policy. It was very successful. Last year, 76% of new dwellings were built on brownfield sites, up from 55% in 1989. We need only look at the centre of cities like Leeds and Manchester to see that it is working, or consider that in the last decade the proportion of new homes built on the green belt fell from 4% to 2%. It is estimated that there are almost 62,000 hectares of brownfield land in England that are ready for building on, which would be enough to build about 1.2 million homes.

The Minister appears to argue that a

> "land with the least environmental or amenity value"

approach is the same as this "brownfield first" policy. If that is the case, why change it? If it is not the case, then we can understand why people are worried. Indeed, the Government's own impact assessment refers to

> "removing the target and the priority for brownfield development".

Mr Marcus Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman before, and I want to make some progress.

I cannot understand why the Government wish to get rid of the "brownfield first" policy. It is simply wrong to let undeveloped land, including greenfield sites, be used while old buildings and previously developed land in our towns and cities are available. I hope the Government will reinstate that policy.

Another reason why the removal of this policy has caused so much concern is the worry that green belt and other green land will be put under greater pressure as a result. The Minister has denied that, but that confidence is not shared by others. Existing planning policy—planning policy statement 4—states that:

> "Local planning authorities should ensure that the countryside is protected for the sake of its intrinsic character and beauty".

There is also a presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt. I hope that both those points will be fully reflected in the revised draft. That would, after all, be consistent with what the Minister said today about the Government's natural environment White Paper and the value of nature.

I ask the Minister to address the following questions. Has he seen the CPRE's legal opinion, which argues that the new formulation of words may weaken green belt protection? I accept that the legal argument is quite technical, but it makes the point about uncertainty and it deserves an answer.

Mr James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: No, I am going to draw my remarks to a close, as many Members wish to contribute to the debate.

Has the Minister seen the legal advice of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds that the draft NPPF would weaken protection for sites of special scientific interest? Will he therefore consider including SSSIs in the protection provided by paragraph 16 of the framework?

In respect of development, where would the Government's alternative to the "brownfield first" policy leave agricultural land where someone seeks to argue that it has low environmental value? We need an answer to that. I also hope the Government will reinstate the "town centre first" policy, as removing office development from the sequential test is the wrong approach.

The framework must support affordable housing. As currently drafted, it implies that affordable housing can be traded off to make a scheme more viable. What is an "acceptable return" for landowners and developers? That is not defined, so who will make that judgment?

Turning to the important question of how this will all be implemented, because of the speed with which the Government want to introduce their new policy, there is a risk that local councils' own development frameworks will not be ready in time. They might therefore be considered out of date or unclear, and people worry that communities might be left with little protection from developers because of the proposed presumption in favour of sustainable development. That is because paragraph 14 instructs councils to:

> "Grant permission where the plan is absent, silent, indeterminate or where relevant policies are out of date."

Only about half of councils have already drawn up local plans. What assessment has the Minister made of how long it will take all councils to get their plans in place, especially given the cuts in the number of council planning staff? In essence, the worry is that in the absence of proper transitional arrangements, a Bill that everyone has been told will put them in charge of decisions about development may leave them powerless in the face of developers because of the sustainable development presumption. I welcome what the Minister has said today, but he will have to do something about the implementation timetable.

Other issues will also have to be addressed. How will "silent", "indeterminate" and "out of date" be determined? Will that ultimately be up to the courts? How will the duty to co-operate work in practice? One of the weaknesses in the NPPF is that no one knows what that means apart from there being a duty to talk. This is important, of course, because planning issues to do with transport and other infrastructure extend beyond the boundaries of a single local authority. We also note that one part of England will retain a regional plan: London.

Why does the NPPF say that supplementary planning guidance cannot add to the cost of development? Where does that leave design standards, for instance? The Minister has spoken eloquently about the importance of good design, and I agree with him. Where does that leave policies for conservation areas, too, especially as they could not be said

> "to bring forward sustainable development at an accelerated rate,"

which is the circumstance under which such costs are allowed? We need some clarity on this issue.

We do not want to end up with the planning system becoming increasingly combative, rather than consensual, and with applications being decided by the courts—although the courts can already take account of the draft NPPF because it can be seen as a material consideration. We are currently awaiting the Select Committee reports, but will the Minister say whether he intends there to be a further period of consultation after publishing a revised draft? That would be very welcome and would offer reassurance. Does he also intend to enable Parliament to vote on these proposals, as it should? We are changing 60 years of planning policy—we are changing the post-war planning settlement—in a way that many have concerns about, and the Government should not fear a vote in the House.

Ultimately, planning should be about helping us to find the right balance for the places in which we live and the landscapes upon which we walk. We support a streamlined and effective planning system, but it needs to make all of us feel that we can shape those places and care for that landscape. We need to feel it takes account of our need for homes, jobs and businesses to be backed, and for a countryside that we can all cherish.

Ultimately, when we leave to one side all of the words, paragraphs, material considerations and statutory obligations, the aim is to find that balance. I hope Ministers will listen to the debate that is raging on these proposals—we need only look at the number of Members wishing to speak today—because a profound change is worth making only if it makes for a better system and a better land.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I remind Members that there is an eight-minute time limit on speeches?

1.29 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): It is an honour to be called so early in this important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I wish to start by saying how much I salute the Government's aims in making planning more accessible for all. Most residents, and even some councillors and MPs, myself included, find the current complexity of the canon of planning law impenetrable. The existing planning system has not worked. It has not managed to deliver the number of new homes we need, nor has it been flexible enough to meet the needs of business. Of course it has also generated an enormous amount of suspicion and hostility. Last month, my local council voted to withdraw its local development framework after the planning inspector, on the basis of the existing legislation, explicitly instructed it to include more greenfield sites in its plan.

Duncan Hames: Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government will have failed to achieve greater localism through their reforms if we end up with more decisions being made by planning inspectors in that way?

Rebecca Harris: I absolutely agree. I very much want decisions to be much more locally based. That inspector's demand would have resulted in a crazy oversupply of land and it caused uproar in the local community, and I am indebted to my local councillors for the withdrawal. It seems that the inspector had been very much persuaded by the counsel of the large-unit developers that the council had failed to provide enough deliverable land in the first years of its plan, despite the fact that it had allocated a good quantity of land on previously developed sites to meet its current targets.

The existing system in this country requires councils to allocate sites for which they have evidence that the building can take place within the first five years and then within the second five years. After that, there is up to a decade or so of supply of more safeguarded land. However, I have watched the processes at first hand and it strikes me that what counts as evidence in planning circles is often simply argument—often that of the large-unit builders.

Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head in relation to planning inquiries: Swindon has had similar experiences of this, as have I. Does she agree that it is essential that in the new policy framework the concept of deliverability is construed in a way that allows local authorities to argue before planning inspectors that economic realities often mean that although on paper it may not look as though they have a five-year land supply, they in fact do. That is particularly relevant to Swindon.

Rebecca Harris: I very much take that point. It is often much easier to argue that a very attractive, leafy, virgin greenfield or green-belt site can be brought forward in the early stages of the plan and it is always easier to argue that the previously developed or the brownfield sites, possibly in multiple ownership—

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): I apologise for stopping the hon. Lady in mid flow. Does she accept that the Government's new homes bonus policy militates in favour of councils providing and supporting greenfield development, because they will get more money back as a result of doing so?

Rebecca Harris: I am not sure that it does. The new homes bonus gives something new to councils to help them to bring forward brownfield sites, because they will have an incentive to do so through a reward—I will come on to discuss that.

The system has expressly driven greenfield and, in my area, green-belt development, almost irrespective of how much less environmentally sensitive land there is in a council area. That contradicts the previous Government's boast that they had a genuine town centre or brownfield-first policy in the past decade. The system we have had could best be described not as a planning system but as an allocation system, with allocations made on the basis of the sites that best suit the business model of the developers, not the needs and aspirations of local communities. Despite two Treasury-led Barker reviews, it was comprehensively shown that that approach to planning failed to deliver the number of new homes that we desperately need, even during a housing boom. The added irony is that in practice land was often just land-banked for developers, as happened in my constituency, making a mockery of the stated objective of bringing these sites forward in the early part of the process.

The current draft national planning policy framework maintains a requirement on councils to show "deliverability" and "developability", which means evidence that sites will come forward. I appreciate that the Government are clear about their intention to protect the green belt, and I wholeheartedly welcome that, as do my constituents. However, I strongly believe that their final document needs to make it much clearer to councils that they will now have a duty to work a lot harder to bring forward previously developed land first and will not be able to fall back on green belt land, as happened in the past. As I said, the new homes bonus now gives councils the confidence to invest in working harder to do that by aggressively packaging their brownfield sites and dealing with empty properties. I hope that it will be very clear to councils that they should take this much more proactive, positive approach to planning in the future. They should not just allocate sites and sit back and see what happens.

I want the Government to go even further: I would like them to drop the requirement to plan for so many years ahead. I appreciate that the industry will say that it needs certainty and possibly therefore needs to have certainty of supply for 16 or more years, but I can see that as being of benefit only for those who wish to land bank. Economic and social conditions in an area can change enormously over that time frame and the requirement to make decisions for so many years ahead may cause more consternation, opposition and planning blight needlessly. It paints a picture for communities of huge housing expansion, which may never happen. It is therefore perfectly practical, and in no way detracts from the emphasis on a plan-led process, to have councils working on a rolling five-year basis. They would then be working much more on the basis of evidence, and much less on the basis of supposition and what I consider to be argument. Plans would be based on fewer assumptions, could be much more responsive to local community needs and economic changes, and would certainly generate less suspicion and opposition.

I also appreciate that the Government have said that they will introduce some form of transitional measures to protect councils from speculative applications by builders while we are between the two planning regimes. The transitional arrangements will have to take into account the fact that a lot of local authorities have been working on their previous local plans and have a bank of published evidence that they have put together to meet the demands of those previous plans and the previous housing targets. I fear that that so-called evidence, which, as I have argued, is sometimes just argument, could be used by developers to try to prove a presumption in favour of sustainable development for their sites in future. So the transitional arrangements will need to protect councils from that risk during the period between the two documents. The draft NPPF rightly allows councils to re-evidence their proposed local plans and base housing need on relevant local factors. I hope that it will be made very clear to them that they also should do so.

In conclusion, I congratulate Ministers on wiping away this very damaging legacy from the previous Government's planning regime and ensuring that, in the spirit of localism, local people have a chance to shape their neighbourhoods on the basis of accurate and true local need. There is a wider legacy left from the former planning regimes and the final document needs to be careful to address that.

1.37 pm

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I welcome the new draft national planning policy framework's stated aim of reducing the bureaucratic burden of development by simplifying and reducing national planning policy and guidance, and promoting sustainable growth. However, although I support the aims, I have concerns that some important aspects have been lost or watered down, which could have a negative long-term effect on future planning decisions.

I wish to focus my remarks on the importance of retaining and enhancing traditional street and covered markets, and to express my concern that there is no mention in the new framework of the important role that such markets can play in promoting healthy communities and sustainable town centres. Markets are the original high streets; they are places where people come together to buy and sell goods, meet each other, catch up and enjoy a sense of community in a public place. Stockport has sustained a traditional market, which recently celebrated its 750th anniversary. It is situated in Market place, which is itself of historic interest with the recently refurbished market hall and Staircase house.

As well as being a source of food and goods, markets provide jobs, opportunities for social interaction and an important public space that can be used for concerts and other community events. Many big names, such as Marks & Spencer, started off on market stalls, and markets have always provided an opportunity for business start-ups. The latest innovation from the National Market Traders Federation, endorsed by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, is a new initiative called First Pitch, which encourages budding entrepreneurs to try their hand at market trading. In Stockport, like elsewhere, there are many empty shops, so once traders involved in First Pitch have established themselves they can perhaps could move their businesses into those shops, thus benefiting town centres as a whole.

Town centres, like markets, are facing challenges from out-of-town shopping centres and internet shopping, which have undoubtedly taken their toll. If town centres cease to be attractive to shoppers, markets in those town centres will suffer, but if markets cease to be attractive, the town centres will suffer. They complement each other.

I was pleased to attend this week's meeting of the all-party group on town centres, chaired by the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who, I know, has a strong interest in the regeneration of town centres and in markets. It was very interesting to listen to the guest speaker, Mary Portas, who has been asked by the Government to conduct an independent review on the future of the high street. I look forward to her report.

I strongly believe that it is no use blaming out-of-town shopping centres or the internet. We must recognise that shopping habits are changing and people will make choices about where they shop. All town centres will have to think innovatively and consider developing their own unique "special offer". I look forward to Mary Portas's thoughts on that.

I know that Stockport is very much focused on just that and I believe that it could, in future, develop a unique special offer based on cultural and historical sites and on continuing to develop its market. It is important that Stockport does that because it faces competition from nine other shopping centres in Greater Manchester. I welcome the support for markets from the previous Government and from this Government and the Minister responsible for markets, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell)—and Hazel Grove is in Stockport.

The current planning policy statement 4 contains an express statement supporting the role of and investment in markets. It states that local planning authorities should proactively plan to promote competitive town centre environments and provide consumer choice by retaining and enhancing existing markets and, where appropriate, re-introducing or creating new ones and ensuring that markets remain attractive and competitive by investing in their improvement. That is not in the new planning policy framework and although I understand the need to reduce the volume of policy and guidance documentation, I would still urge the Minister to put in an express reference to the role of markets in contributing to retail diversity and to healthy and sustainable high streets and town centres—including farmers markets, which bring an important sense of place by providing foods that come specifically from the local area.

Traditional street and covered markets have been at the hub of our town centres for centuries and they are well able to adapt to the challenges of the future. I believe their value should be emphasised in any planning guidance for promoting consumer choice and competitive and vibrant town centres. I look forward to the Minister taking those remarks on board.

1.42 pm

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): May I, too, welcome the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) to his new role? I also congratulate the two previous speakers, the hon. Members for Stockport (Ann Coffey) and for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), who both made very thoughtful—and different—contributions. As I am being nice to everybody, let me also say that I share the ambitions outlined by the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark). I really do. I also welcome this debate, because it is an opportunity to show that we can engage in constructive debate and ensure that we get this important change right.

Locally, I was a vociferous opponent of the implications of the south-west regional spatial strategy for housing in my constituency. It could have destroyed green belt and it was entirely top-down and very unpopular. I welcome the thrust of the idea contained in the Localism Bill and neighbourhood planning measures that our approach should be bottom-up, rather than top-down. I liked the Minister's reference to the idea that planning should not be done to people, but should involve working

[Annette Brooke]

with them. I want to achieve that, so I hope he sees my contribution as constructive because, although I like the principles, a lot of the detail needs attention.

I support the need to reform our planning system. It has achieved a great deal in the past 50 years, but it can be improved and needs to encourage further public participation at a local level. That is important. We need to reduce delays and to have more flexibility in the system and I believe that we could better deliver sustainable development. It is a great idea to reduce 1,000 pages of guidance into a more concise framework and if we were to aim for fewer than 100 pages, that would probably be good, but the clarity and detail of that reduced document must, of course, be right.

The document as it stands reads as having a presumption in favour of development as distinct from sustainable development. For me, it is crucial that we address that. I agree with previous speakers that getting the definition of "sustainable development" right in the document at the outset is crucial, and if we keep to that consistent definition throughout the document, everything else should fall into place. We should be considering the 2005 definition because it is generally accepted and we do not have the time, now we have started this, to embark on setting out a definition that might—perhaps—be better in some respects. We have set the hare running, we must go with it and, I suggest, the 2005 definition is pretty good. We must also be absolutely clear that sustainable development and sustainable economic growth are not identical concepts and we should be very careful of the language.

I want to see a planning framework that can create economic prosperity, meet the needs of all sectors of society, protect our environment and its resources and provide a pathway to a low-carbon future. Within that, my personal priority for my constituency is to ensure we have the right type of affordable housing. Under the top-down targets we have had in the past, there have been two-bedroom flats galore and not enough family houses. There are all sorts of things we must be careful about. My main objection to the housing targets from the south-west regional spatial strategy was that I could imagine executive homes and second homes galore all over our green belt, and I felt that that was totally wrong.

So, first, let us get the definition right and be absolutely clear. The five principles that have already been outlined should be carried forward. Let me quickly go through some of the detailed points that need to be addressed. I absolutely support the principle that development must be plan-led and our clear definition of sustainable development should set the scene for such local plans. I am personally quite inspired by the idea of neighbourhood plans, but we must take care that everybody has equal access to resources to enable them to be carried out. I want to be sure that the local development plan, when it is completed, has genuine sovereignty. I do not want the Treasury to have a trump card over what has been determined locally.

We have mentioned the transition period, which is crucial, over and over again. I must emphasise how important that is, given that local authorities do not have up-to-date development plans. It is totally unacceptable to say that the default answer is yes, unless the plan is in place. I have made some proposals for possible time periods in my response to the consultation.

I am also weary about the five-year land supply plus 20%. That is top-down and the situations will be different for different authorities. There should be co-operation between authorities because some authorities will have such great constraints that they will be forced into the precious green sites in their urban structure. It is important to have a wider vision so that there is co-operation and we ensure that local authority plans are assessed against each other.

The provision, quality and quantity of affordable housing is very important.

Caroline Lucas: I very much support what the hon. Lady is saying, passionately, about housing. However, does she agree that the main impediment to house building in recent years has been not the planning system but money and that if the Government were really concerned about it they could reverse the 60% cut to the affordable housing budget? That would do more for housing than ripping up England's planning system.

Annette Brooke: I think that the Government have been rather successful this year in achieving a commitment to affordable housing with the money that has been made available—170,000 is a figure not to be sniffed at, although, obviously, we all want more.

I do not want to lose the current section 106 provision, which is an important top-up to what the Government might be providing. It is very important that the Planning Inspectorate should not be able to override a local plan that has specified a certain proportion of affordable housing on particular sites.

On the "brownfield first" approach—I think that is in paragraph 165—we need to have the guidance to go with that. A very important point has been made about good-quality agricultural land, but we need a sensible sequential test. That has to be considered in the context of the whole five years, or six years, as has already been mentioned, and of the outstanding 300,000 planning permissions. We really do want to make sure that we use the least-valuable land first. That is very important.

We should also be looking at giving some encouragement to developers to implement their planning permissions, because that gives a further break. There are a lot more points that I wanted to make. I support the heritage lobby, which is all-important, and I note the importance of protecting the diversity of our local high streets. More needs to be said about neighbourhood plans and how we may amend local use classes. That needs to be clear. Transport and spatial plans are also important, as is flood risk management. Most of all, let us be clear that we need our three pillars: economic, social and environmental considerations.

1.52 pm

Mr Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I draw attention to the interests declared on the Register of Members' Financial Interests and highlight two non-pecuniary interests as an honorary fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute and as a director of the Town and Country Planning Association.

I welcome the remarks of the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) about greater clarity in the definition of sustainable development—a point on which I shall pick up—and I agree with a number of the other points she made.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on his new appointment and on his absolutely first-rate contribution to the debate, in which he forensically analysed the Government's failures and highlighted the key issues that will need to be addressed if we are to get some sense out of the mess we are in. Let there be no mistake about it—we are in a mess on planning, and it is a mess of the Government's making.

The Government's actions were based initially on an incorrect analysis of the problem. They were very happy to speak glibly about the previous system having failed to deliver, and they have continued to make those claims with no regard for the facts. I am going to put on the record, for the Minister's benefit, the facts about net additions to the housing stock during the period of the previous Government leading up to the recession. From a low of 130,000 net additions to the stock in 2001, we saw an absolutely steady, year-on-year increase to 143,000 in 2002-03, to 155,000 in 2003-04, to 169,000 in 2004-05, to 186,000 in 2005-06, to 199,000 in 2006-07 and to 207,000 in 2007-08. That was not a system that was bust. Members on the Government Benches who oppose housing development may not have approved of it, but it was delivering more homes at a time when there was a shift in favour of brownfield development, so more of those homes were on brownfield sites and the countryside was being more effectively protected. That was a success, and it is shameful of the Government to fail to acknowledge that and to try to pretend that their radical new proposals are somehow addressing a problem of failure when they are not.

Having made their proposals on the basis of an incorrect analysis, the Government built up false expectations by promising the earth to neighbourhoods about their having the ability to refuse unwelcome planning applications. In the run-up to the general election we heard again and again that the Conservative policy of neighbourhood planning would enable neighbourhoods to refuse developments. Having built up those expectations, the Conservatives precipitately, when they came into government, acted to cancel regional spatial strategies without bothering to take the trouble to find out whether what they were doing was lawful. As a result, that policy was struck down in the High Court. What a shambles! What a way to go about doing things. In the course of doing that, they inevitably created uncertainty, and the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) rightly highlighted what all people interested in development know—that certainty is absolutely crucial if we are to have an effective planning system. I am afraid that the Government's actions have destroyed any certainty.

George Hollingbery (Meon Valley) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Raynsford: No; I have limited time and I have to make some progress.

Having thrown the system into chaos—

George Hollingbery *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to give way he will give way. The hon. Gentleman should sit down when he will not.

Mr Raynsford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. When the system had been thrown into chaos, contributing to a collapse in planning applications, the Government's friends in the Treasury realised the damage that was being done, so we saw the very significant U-turn in policy that was announced by the Chancellor at the time of the Budget in which the policy was to change. "Yes," he said, "Of course neighbourhoods must have a say, but the presumption will be in favour of development; the default position will be, 'yes'." That was entirely at odds with Ministers' previous rhetoric, and, not surprisingly, all those who had been led to believe that the new Government were going to have a system that would make it easier for communities to refuse development felt incensed.

That is the explanation for the mess that the Government have got themselves into. They have simultaneously achieved the lowest level of new planning permissions for housing almost in recorded history while having an absolutely incensed body of campaigners who believe that they are opening the door to concreting over the countryside. It is a pretty extraordinary achievement to have done those two things simultaneously, but that is what they have achieved. There has been a disastrous collapse in planning applications for housing. The figures, just in case the Minister is not aware of them, are that just 25,171 residential planning permissions were granted in England in the second quarter of this year. That figure is 24% lower than that for the first quarter and 23% lower than that for the equivalent quarter in 2010. Indeed, it is one of the lowest figures ever recorded—ever recorded! That is the reality. It is fewer than half the number of homes we need to meet needs: 60,000 a quarter would be required to keep pace with requirements. At the same time, they have incensed all the people who care about the countryside, who think they are opening the door to inappropriate development.

George Hollingbery: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Raynsford: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

George Hollingbery: I am very grateful. I suspect that what we have just heard is long on invective and short on fact. These proposals are about more than housing; they are about planning in general. Does the right hon. Gentleman describe a system in which 50% of local authorities had not adopted local plans and in which large areas of the country had not adopted regional spatial strategies as anything other than confusion and mess?

Mr Raynsford: First, I have given a number of facts. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should advise his Front-Bench team to be rather more respectful of the facts. Secondly, when I was the Minister for Housing and Planning in the early years of the Labour Government I inherited a position in which the reforms of the previous Conservative Government had resulted in large numbers of councils not having up-to-date plans in place. The main thrust of my work as Planning Minister was about getting the existing system to work better, rather than about imposing radical changes. I have advised the current Minister and his colleagues that they would do far better to try to work with the existing system than to seek a radical overhaul, which would be likely to create confusion and uncertainty and lead to paralysis in the planning system—which I am afraid is what we have got.

[Mr Raynsford]

That leads me to the national planning policy framework. The problem with that document is that the Government have confused brevity with clarity. They have assumed that by reducing the volume of existing guidance they are producing a clearer and simpler statement, but that simply is not the case. The reality is that in many areas, some of which we have discussed today, sufficient care has not been taken with the definitions in the NPPF to give certainty and clarity. Sustainable development is one such area, and I endorse the views that have been expressed about the need for greater clarity.

Secondly, there is the "brownfield first" issue, another area where the Government have blundered and will need to change. Thirdly, there is not a single reference to new settlements and urban developments. There is no mention whatever of the principles that should apply to those. It is extraordinary that that should be entirely overlooked.

Heidi Alexander: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on an excellent speech. Does he share my concern about the absence of the word "cities" from the national planning policy framework? I find it remarkable that we can have a planning framework for our country that makes no reference to our cities.

Mr Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes, as always, a very telling point. This is the problem: the NPPF has been put together in a hurry, and the Government's objective has been brevity rather than clarity, and as a result it is wanting in many areas and will have to be rewritten.

The fourth area I want to highlight where the NPPF is defective is in respect of mixed developments to ensure that we have balanced communities with affordable and social housing as well as market housing. The NPPF's statement is very inadequate, as the Minister knows only too well. There is a loose reference to "larger scale residential developments" benefiting from mix, but no definition of "larger scale".

The problem, as the Minister knows perfectly well, is that in the absence of clear definitions and documents such as those that existed under the previous regime—the planning policy guidance statements—individual developers, local authorities and communities will form their own judgments, they will be in dispute with each other and there will be a rise in appeals and litigation. It will be the lawyers who determine the outcome rather than the Government, the local authority or the local community. That is the real risk of the position in which the Government are putting themselves and our planning system. In the absence of transitional arrangements, the need for which the Minister now belatedly accepts, people will reach for the lawyers to try to determine what should happen because plans are not fully prepared and in place in time to be referred to.

In summary, we have a planning system that plays an absolutely critical role in mediating between competing interests, which requires carefully considered judgments based on experience built up over decades. Against that background, it was unwise of the Government to proceed in a hubristic way with a year zero approach of trying to rewrite the rules. I am glad they are now beginning to recognise their mistake and to row back. I hope they will now apply rather more intelligence, thoughtfulness and consultation to preparing their revised NPPF, which should be a better document than the current one.

2.2 pm

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford), but I am going to say somewhat different things.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on local government, I have had a very exciting few weeks, with many representations being made to me on this very important issue, as well as my constituents contacting me. I heard much from my Front-Bench colleague today that I thought was very important. I welcome the clarity given on the green belt, on a definition of "sustainability", on the future of planning policy concerning Travellers and on why green infrastructure is so important, linking neighbourhood to neighbourhood. There was clarity too on the importance of sports and recreation fields and, most importantly—because it is the most important part of South Derbyshire—the national forest, which can be linked to future greenfield, green infrastructure areas. Having clarity, including clear definitions, on those matters in the new NPPF after this first draft will be most helpful.

I hope that my constituents, who have written to me in droves about this, will understand the need for the clarity that we will be able to provide with this new document, compared with the mess of the thousand pages of documentation that we had before. We will have neighbourhood and community-led planning, which will be a utopia. I challenge anyone to find a better constituency than South Derbyshire, where we managed to provide a new village of 2,500 houses with only 20 objections because we had community-led planning.

I know that many Members want to speak and I take the view, "If you can't say it in a few minutes, you can't say it at all." Finally, therefore, I say to Ministers, who will be listening to many people today and to much advice, that what they have said today and the clarity that they have provided is most helpful.

2.5 pm

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): I draw Members' attention to the interests of my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford), in which I have an indirect interest.

The Government claim that we need a new national planning policy framework because existing planning rules are holding back house building and growth. That is a false claim, and I want to reinforce the points that have already been made very forcefully in the House and certainly by Members on these Benches.

In the five years to 2007, the last year before the global banking crisis, the credit crunch and the subsequent recession, there was year-on-year growth in house building, with more than 207,000 additional homes delivered in England in 2007 and the delivery of more than 250,000 additional affordable homes over the period of the Labour Government. That is over a third more than this Government hope to deliver over a five-year term. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) implied that 170,000 new homes is a substantial figure, but that is nonsense when we look at the need for housing.

Only last week, the Minister for Housing and Local Government had the bare-faced cheek to try to claim credit for the 60,000 additional affordable homes completed in England in 2010-11. The fact that those were planned for, paid for and started under the last Labour Government, under the existing planning regime, seems conveniently to have slipped his mind.

The reason house-building levels fell during the recession and remain low—indeed, they fell during this Government's first 12 months in office—is not the old planning system. Planning is, of course, important to growth, but the Secretary of State's unlawful meddling with regional spatial strategies last year has, according to some estimates, cost the country hundreds of thousands of new homes already, and in so doing seriously damaged growth. That is the direct outcome of Tory policies on planning and a very clear indication that the Government's left hand does not know what their right hand is doing.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I remind the hon. Lady that the regional spatial strategy in Northumberland meant that authorities could build no more than about 20 or 30 houses. It was a very severe limit on the numbers that they could build, and its removal has given them freedom to build more houses, not fewer.

Alison Seabeck: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point, but regional spatial strategies were set up to ensure that, ideally, houses were built where there was most need. Clearly, across the country overall, that need was starting to be met under the last Labour Government.

Developers are sitting on land. We have heard about the 300,000 existing permissions. What right-minded developer will build homes when nobody is able to buy them? Again, that is not due to the planning system. Instead of dealing with the critical issue of the economy, and the finance and confidence necessary to deliver the investment and pick house building up off the floor, we are having this smokescreen of a debate on planning. However, a debate has sprung up around the country, and it puts planning at the heart of the conflict between growth, the economy and the countryside. That point was very well made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) in his excellent speech. That is a false choice and it has unhelpfully polarised opinion.

It is important that we have clarity in the system—I do not disagree with hon. Members in different parts of the House on that issue—but this false debate is now proving to be a total distraction. The NPPF is a deeply flawed document that needs to be seriously amended, and I hope that the Minister is listening to Members in all parts of the House because the Government are committed to railroading it through.

Under Labour, the green belt was expanded. We pursued a policy of "brownfield first". Brownfield expanded as a proportion of new build as we focused on developments and regeneration—a word that is sadly missing from both the Localism Bill and this document.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Alison Seabeck: No, not at the moment.

We focused on existing communities, and that is missing from the NPPF, and we will see more building on greenfield sites.

The need to protect gardens was not dealt with clearly in the Minister's statement, although it was the driver behind the change in the "brownfield first" presumption. It is not clear exactly how an assessment will be made of land of the least environmental value, and I think that houses and gardens in some very nice areas will fall into that category. We need clearer definitions, and I am pleased that at least he is willing to rethink the wording of brownfield provisions. I urge him to speak to the Prime Minister and insist that when he answers questions on development in the House he should make it clear that there is no threat to the green belt. The Prime Minister should answer the question that he is asked. If he is asked about the threat to green fields—not green belt—he should deal with that. I have to say that the green fields that are going to be built on are in leafy Tory shires.

The NPPF is silent on affordable housing—a point made by my right hon. Friends the Members for Leeds Central and for Greenwich and Woolwich. When is the assessment of housing need going to be made, as there is just a cursory reference to it in the NPPF, and how will the evidence of that need be collated? Again, that is far from clear.

Finally, there was a glimmer of hope or common sense on transitional arrangements, which are vital. Without a transitional period, there will be fears on the one hand of a development free-for-all while, on the other, developers have concerns about the lack of such arrangements. When the Localism Bill is enacted, regional spatial strategies will disappear, and there will be a gap before the NPPF is introduced, with further losses of planned homes on a scale of the losses that have already taken place as a result of announcements by the Secretary of State. This is an incredibly important subject for people on both sides of the debate, and I am pleased that there appears to have been some backtracking.

In the Committee that considered the Localism Bill, the Opposition were asked to legislate without sight of the NPPF. The House, on Report and on Third Reading, was asked to legislate without sight of the document, and now developers and local communities are going to be asked, some time in the future, to plan without sight of the details that they will need, either to support good-quality local development, designed to meet needs, or to protect local areas of importance. Even today, we have had another statement on the abolition of RSSs that discusses the requirement to undertake a proper environmental assessment, albeit voluntarily. It says that the Government are undertaking another consultation on the matter. How can we legislate and make decisions about things as important as the planning policy framework without seeing the outcome of those consultations?

I welcome the fact that the Government have backtracked on their proposals on yet another ill-researched policy that has been introduced in haste. Along with my colleagues, I await the revised NPPF and the debate on it, because the wording of today's motion is far from accurate. The House has not, in my view, considered the NPPF, and we should be allowed another debate on the revised paper, and a vote.

2.13 pm

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The consultation on the draft national planning policy framework is far and away the biggest issue in my constituency, although this weekend it may be run a close second by the forthcoming vote on an EU referendum.

Concerned residents in my beautiful Colne Valley constituency were angered by a poor-quality consultation on Kirklees council's local development framework. The Labour-led council is still obsessed with the top-down housing targets introduced by the previous Government, and it is trying to impose 28,000 new homes on our area. Then came the fiasco over the planning permission for 294 new homes and a data campus development on Lindley moor, which is north of Huddersfield. Despite the fact that democratically elected councillors originally voted against the housing plans, the planning department and the council leadership kept going until they secured a narrow 8:7 vote in favour of the controversial development on green fields. The development should have been rejected on the grounds of poor infrastructure, with clogged roads, oversubscribed schools and medical services at full stretch.

Graham Jones: The hon. Gentleman seems to know a lot about that development. In the planning committee, what did the Highways Agency say about access to the site? Was it in favour, or against?

Jason McCartney: The hon. Gentleman is quite right—I know a lot about this, and sat through a whole day of the planning committee's considerations. I spoke against the proposal. The committee came up with highways figures but, as a number of local residents rightly pointed out, those figures were out of date and they did not apply to peak times in the morning and evening. I attended the committee for many hours, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue, as he has helped to make a good point.

Concerned local people have read and heard about the draft NPPF with deep suspicion. While the aim of simplifying 1,000-plus pages to little more than 50 is laudable, residents in the beautiful countryside of the Colne and Holme valleys, as well as Lindley, fear the phrase,

"presumption in favour of sustainable development".

Local people have interpreted that as a developers charter for more unwanted developments on their rapidly reducing countryside. There is confusion, too, about what sustainable development actually is, and there is a need for a clear definition, as we have heard in our debate.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I want to expand on the point that my hon. Friend made about residents' fears. A planning appeal is under way in my constituency in which the developers are using the phrasing of the NPPF to try to push through, and argue for, wind turbines. We therefore need clarity on what is meant by sustainable development.

Jason McCartney: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on the issue of wind turbines in his constituency, and I know that he will continue to campaign. That was an excellent point.

I shall return to housing, which is the big issue in my constituency. The draft NPPF aims to give local people a real say via their local plan. As I have said, people in my patch have to suffer a Labour-run Kirklees council hellbent on development, whatever the cost to our countryside and environment. All of this suspicion, fear and rumour has led to numerous community groups getting together to have their say on the flawed local development framework and the NPPF. I have fully engaged with those groups, especially the Kirklees community action network. I have spoken at meetings in Slaithwaite and my home village of Honley, and will be doing so in Meltham in a fortnight.

Like many hon. Members, I have received numerous e-mails and letters and, as I said, I have met local action groups, which have copied me into their submissions to the consultation. They have spent many hours on their consultations, and they have made some excellent points, some of which I shall summarise. I urge Ministers to take note of them. First, we should change the main presumption statement to read: "presumption in favour of sustainable development on brownfield sites or those of lesser environmental impact." Basically, we should adopt a brownfield-first policy.

Secondly—and Opposition Members will not like this—we should stop councils using the old top-down housing targets. I appreciate that the Government have tried to do so through the courts—they have been frustrated—but we should get this in the NPPF, because the problem, as I said, is that my Labour-run local council is sticking with the regional spatial strategy target of 28,000 homes even though no one has any idea where it got that figure from.

Thirdly, Kirklees council has more than 11,000 empty homes. It is madness to keep building on green fields when we have those empty homes. We should try to get as many of them back into use as possible, and there should be more mention of that in the NPPF.

Mrs Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has put the emphasis on a Labour council, but in my Tory-run council residents groups are at loggerheads with our Tory mayor and cabinet, who insist on building houses next to a country park, when brownfield sites are available. Should we not say that all councils can be stubborn, instead of putting the emphasis on Labour councils?

Jason McCartney: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment. Obviously I can only talk knowledgeably about my local council. We are working hard in Kirklees to get a Conservative-run council, and then we will be able to compare them.

Fourthly, let us accept that relaxing the rules on development will not necessarily help the economy—a point that has already been made. Houses are not being built because home buyers cannot get mortgages as a result of the huge deposits required, not because of a lack of available land with planning permission. The only reason houses are not being built is that builders cannot sell them. Across the country thousands of newly built and older homes are currently unoccupied, as I have already pointed out, and developers are sitting on hundreds of thousands of unimplemented planning permissions. In Kirklees alone there is land equivalent to 5.1% of the existing housing stock or about 16 years' supply of building land at current levels of house building activity already with planning permission, but it has not been built on yet.

Fifthly, although the framework offers some theoretical protection to green-belt land, for example for sites of special scientific interest and heritage sites, it also gives local authorities and developers the freedom to override those protections if development can be shown to offer significant economic benefit. It offers no protection to other greenfield land. That is wholly inappropriate in semi-urban areas, and we are really worried in my part of the world, particularly with provisional open land, that the net effect might be that the villages will end up sprawling together. These are all points that my local community groups have been talking about.

As I have said, people in my neck of the woods are between a rock and a hard place. On one hand there is the presumption in favour of sustainable development if no local plan is in place, and local people are interpreting that as a developer's charter. On the other hand, there is a Labour-run local council that is trying to shove through the plans for 28,000 new homes by massive green-belt release. We have either a flawed local plan or that presumption; no wonder people in my area are so worried.

Heidi Alexander: I am genuinely interested in the hon. Gentleman's answer to this question: are community groups in his constituency coming forward with an alternative plan, through neighbourhood forums and their own neighbourhood plans, for areas where they could accommodate new housing growth?

Jason McCartney: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. That is why I have given those groups details about the neighbourhood planning front-runners scheme, which can assist them in developing neighbourhood plans and provide funding of up to £20,000 to help that. The groups are very well organised and I have pointed them in the right direction. They have come forward and are working with other local groups, such as civic societies, town trusts and parish councils, to come up with a neighbourhood plan, which is a very positive side of our localism structure.

In summary, we should of course simplify the planning system, but let us prioritise developments on brownfield sites, bring empty homes back into use and protect what is left of our countryside by ensuring that local plans genuinely reflect local wishes.

2.22 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Communities and Local Government Committee, which I chair, is in the middle of an inquiry on the national planning policy framework, so, like the Minister, I do not want to come to conclusions today, as it is important to hear all the evidence before reaching any decisions. I thank the Minister for advising the Committee at an early stage of his intention to bring in a new NPPF and for asking us whether we wanted to be involved in the consultation process by conducting an inquiry. We have indicated that we will reach our conclusions before the Christmas recess as part of the consultation. I also want to welcome my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) to his new post and thank him for raising a number of important points in his contribution, many of which have been raised with the Committee and which we want to address.

I am sure that the objectives that the Government are trying to achieve—building more homes and providing more jobs—are shared across the House. I certainly have a long-standing interest in trying to increase the number of homes being built in this country. It is a prime need and something that all Members should be interested in. The real issue, of course, is where that building and development will take place. That, in essence, is what the planning system is all about.

In looking at the Government's proposals, there are a number of questions we want to ask first. Is the planning system really responsible for the lack of house building and growth in this country? Is there evidence for that? Those are the questions we should address first. If there are problems with the planning system, is it a problem of the policy and guidance, or one of process? Is the process of getting local plans agreed too lengthy? Those are the sorts of issues that the Committee wants to look at, but the fundamental question is this: is there clear evidence that planning is holding back house building and growth, or are other factors more important?

The Committee has certainly heard much conflicting evidence. We had the National Trust and the Home Builders Federation sitting before us giving evidence together, so it was apparent that there are slightly different views about the wisdom of the Government's proposals. We all welcome the fact that the Minister is listening, and hopefully he will listen to the Committee's recommendations when they are made. If he is minded in the end to make some significant changes to his proposals, will he consider a further round of consultation? If we are really to get this right, is it not important that we have the maximum amount of dialogue, because there is a common interest in trying to ensure that the matter is taken forward in the right way.

I welcome what the Minister said about transitional arrangements. We have heard much evidence suggesting that we cannot simply press a button and change from one system to another without an awful lot of problems being created. Indeed, there is legal evidence suggesting that, because no local plan will be in place that has had a chance to take account of a new framework once agreed, on day one all local plans will effectively be out of date and inconsistent with the national guidance. Clearly, therefore, there must be a transition to allow change to take place. The history of changes in planning policy and legislation reveals that any change at all, and even the proposal of change, creates uncertainty and tends to cause delay, increase the number of appeals and involve the lawyers to a greater extent. We ought to look at how we can minimise those impacts and get to the best position.

A number of specific concerns have been raised with the Committee which we will want to look at. First, is all the guidance that is being scrapped really useless? Has any planning authority really said, "This is irrelevant and we have no need for it?" Is there a danger that once it is all removed at national level councils will start to look at the local level and incorporate more and more in their local plans, because if their local plan is silent on something they will worry that they will get development that they do not want? That is a concern that we must reflect on. Will simply stripping out everything and pretending that it does not matter really be of benefit?

What is the precise link between the national guidance, local plans and neighbourhood plans, which are very new and untested? The framework refers a great deal to

[Mr Clive Betts]

the importance of local plans, but it does not say that any application that is approved has to be consistent with the local plan. That is stated in national legislation, so there is a relationship, but is it absolutely clear, because national legislation apparently has primacy over the guidance? That relationship has to be worked through. Having listened to Government Members, I think there is clearly an issue to be worked through about the national requirements for more homes, on climate change and regional requirements on waste disposal, and on Traveller sites and how they relate to local aspirations at local planning level where there may be differences. If all the local plans and the plans for housing in them do not add up to the requirements that we need at national level to build sufficient homes, where does that leave us? There are clearly concerns that go beyond one local authority boundary. The duty to co-operate is in place and the Minister has taken steps to strengthen it, but is it sufficient to ensure that we can deliver on those wider issues? There are some carrots, but are there any sticks? Can any penalties be imposed on local authorities that do not co-operate, and what does not co-operating actually amount to? Those are also concerns.

Concerns have been raised with the Committee about sustainable development. Should there be a national definition, which is much clearer and, perhaps, written down in legislation or in the framework? Should it be included? If it is, the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) made will be important. Will the definition be applied consistently at a local level, or will there be differences in an application and in how we apply the definition in a northern industrial town with lots of dereliction, as opposed to in a leafy suburb in the south or, indeed, in a national park? There is not much special reference in the framework to the differences that might be applicable and relevant in different areas, so we want to address those matters in particular, and it is important that we do so.

People have made the point to the Committee that the framework came out of proposals for growth. There are three legs—economic, social and environmental—to the stool of sustainable development, but has the economic leg become a little longer than the other two, and is the stool becoming a little unbalanced? Is too much emphasis being given to economic factors, which in any decision might override environmental and social factors?

Duncan Hames: I am finding the hon. Gentleman's speech very informative, as indeed was his pertinent intervention during the opening speech. Does he share my concern that the question of whether an application qualifies for the presumption of sustainable development might end up being decided by the courts and through case law, rather than by local, democratically accountable councillors?

Mr Betts: That is absolutely right. No one here wants lawyers involved in making decisions that should properly be made in this Parliament, and that is why we have to get the policy absolutely right and look at the definitions. Indeed, there is a range of definitions in the framework, some of which are untested and we want to be clear about.

In the Select Committee the other day, we took evidence on the issue of "significant and demonstrable". What does it mean? When we pushed a practitioner who was on the group that made the initial recommendations to Ministers, asking him, "What does significant mean?" he said, "Well, of course, if it wasn't significant, it wouldn't matter." That is an issue, because the adverse consequences of a development might outweigh the benefits, but if they do not outweigh them in a significant and demonstrable way, the application will still have to be accepted. We have to probe some of the definitions.

I welcome the Minister's comments on brownfield development and on taking another look at it. I understand some of the concerns of Government Members about building in gardens, but we should not allow those concerns to enable the removal of brownfield development. The Minister is looking again at that issue and, in particular, at how it relates to the additional 20% of houses and the contingency that will have to be planned for. That is very welcome, indeed.

We have to look at the "town centre first" issue. Why have offices been removed from it? They are an important part of a sustainable "town centre first" strategy, so will the Minister make it clear that, if an application fails a sequential test, it will be deemed unsustainable? How does the sequential test relate to that issue?

The Minister has not mentioned the needs test, which it was Conservative policy in opposition to reinstate. I opposed the previous Labour Government's removal of it, so will he look at that issue, too?

The Select Committee has a lot of issues to look at. We will try to do so in an evidence-based way, which is how we try to operate; we will try to identify the real concerns; and, where we think that there are genuine concerns, we will try to go to the Minister with some clear proposals on how the document might be amended with benefit.

2.32 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Committee, because he is one of the more knowledgeable Opposition Members on these matters, and he made some very pertinent points.

We may trade figures, as the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) started to do, but his Government inherited a golden legacy, and although the planning system can bring forward permissions, it cannot ensure that houses are built. His Government inherited a golden legacy, but they managed to ruin it, and we are now are in a very difficult situation in which we need to build more houses. The planning system has a part, but only a part, to play in that; the market has a big part to play, too.

I welcome the actions of my right hon. Friend the Minister in getting rid of regional spatial strategies, which the previous Government introduced. I have opposed them very strongly, simply because they have not worked. They have not produced the number of local plans required, and they have alienated many local people from the planning system, so my right hon. Friend has done the right thing in bringing forward this new national planning framework. I wish him every possible success.

I declare an interest, which is in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I have property that could benefit from these planning changes, and I, like the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich declared, have a non-pecuniary interest, too, because I am a fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and used to practise in the planning field.

One issue that is not in the NPPF is the costs in the planning appeal process. In my experience, small local authorities often have to weigh up the correct planning decision while bearing in mind the cost of appeal. My local authority has a development budget of about £2 million, and, if it has to take on board four appeals in any one year at £50,000 each, that is 10% of its entire development budget.

I have a proposal to deal with that. The default setting should be that the developer, who after all gets the benefit, will be expected to pay the local authority's reasonable costs on an appeal. The issue of costs could then be varied by either the planning inspector or the Secretary of State in a particular place where the local planning authority has acted blatantly and without good reason against its own local plan or has ignored relevant national guidance.

Turning now to the issues that are governed by the draft NPPF, my first concern is about the guidance relating to the increased supply of housing. I am particularly concerned about the requirement in paragraph 109 for local authorities to provide an additional 20% of the existing five-year land bank. The five-year land bank is a rolling programme. Every time one permission is built on, it has to be replaced with a new permission. In my area, that is bringing about a substantial amount of new building land. If we impose this extra land on top of the existing five-year land bank, it will become unsustainable, it will sterilise more land through planning permission than is necessary, and it will give rise to the wrong assumptions on infrastructure planning. I hope that the Government will think very carefully about introducing this additional 20%; otherwise, many people in our areas will become very disillusioned with the planning system.

Duncan Hames: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I will give way once.

Duncan Hames: In response to my earlier question, the Minister said that he did not want to require local authorities to build for more than the five-year housing supply. That being the case, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that the housing that is derived from windfall developments should be taken into consideration against the need that the local authority needs to meet?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He must have my notes, so I shall continue.

The Government should reconsider what counts towards housing numbers in a local authority area. First, they should allow for windfall sites; after all, these are real gains, and they should be encouraged.

Mr Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): We are a team now.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Well, we are in coalition together.

Secondly, exceptions and additional neighbourhood sites should be included. Thirdly, new agricultural and forestry dwellings should be included. Fourthly, sheltered or high-dependency housing accompanying a nursing home application should be included. That is particularly relevant to my constituency, where we have three large such applications on areas that perhaps would not usually be given permission, but they would gain greater currency in the local community if people felt that they were contributing towards the five-year plan.

Paragraph 109 requires local authorities to

"identify and bring back into use empty housing and buildings".

This has been a problem for many decades. There are about 740,000 empty houses in England. When I had a housing brief in opposition, I surveyed most of our major institutions that had a presence on the high street to discover why so many of the flats about their shops were empty. Most said that they did not find occupants for those flats because it was too administratively burdensome. The NPPF needs to have stronger guidance to bring back into use these empty properties, which are a shocking waste of our built environment.

The vitality and viability of town centres is dealt with in paragraph 78. Town centres, particularly in smaller rural market towns such as those that I represent, are undergoing significant change. The increased trend towards shopping online is causing many retail businesses to reduce their presence on the high street or to leave it altogether. Many town centres are therefore coming under pressure as demand for retail space drops. Nothing is worse for a town than the sight of a large number of derelict shops. The NPPF needs to be straightforward so that local authorities can consider ways of strengthening the vitality and viability of town centres and are able to resist applications where they are threatened, first, by out-of-town centre schemes, and then, by edge-of-town centre schemes.

Jason McCartney: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I said that I would give way only once, if my hon. Friend does not mind.

Special consideration needs to be given to small market towns, because they are particularly vulnerable to such large developments.

Design is a very important issue for those in special vernacular design areas such as the Cotswolds. On the whole, post-war planning has been successful in keeping the distinctive Cotswold stone wall and roof construction. However, guidance such as that in paragraphs 21 and 118 seems to run totally counter to what has been achieved in the Cotswolds over so many decades. The way around this would be to allow particular vernacular styles to predominate only in those areas where it can be proved that it has done so in the past, as must be clearly demonstrated in the adopted local plans.

Finally, as the Member of Parliament for a constituency of which more than 80% is comprised of areas of outstanding natural beauty, I warmly welcome Ministers having said that national parks, green belts and areas of outstanding natural beauty will be protected. However, I think that the guidance in paragraph 167 needs to be strengthened in that respect. I suggest to my right hon.

[Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

Friend the Minister that it follow the wording of policy ENV3 of the south-west regional spatial strategy on protected landscapes:

> "Particular care will be taken to ensure that no development is permitted outside the National Park or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty which would damage their natural beauty, character and special qualities or otherwise prejudice the achievement of National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty purposes."

These are some of the most special landscapes in the country. As has been said, we live in a densely populated country, particularly when the hilly areas of England, Wales and Scotland are taken out of the equation. It is therefore particularly important that we get the planning system right and, in particular, the NPPF.

I urge my right hon. Friend to resist too much more additional consultation. Planning practitioners now need to get on with the system, which I am sure will be improved and will be more friendly to local people. I warmly welcome the idea of local decision making and neighbourhood plans. I can tell my right hon. Friend that many of my parish and town councils are lining up to draw up neighbourhood plans, because they have become so fed up with a regional planning system that is based many hundreds of miles away. They want to feel that they have ownership of the planning system and that they will benefit from applications in their area.

I only have a couple of seconds left, but I just want to say that pre-planning application is really important. I have gone through it successfully with a big house builder in my constituency and we have got an application that is much more acceptable to the local communities. I urge Members to encourage that. Good luck to my right hon. Friend.

2.41 pm

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): This is an interesting and important debate, not least because it comes in the context of the Government's intention to be the "greenest Government ever". We must ask how their planning policies sit within that ambition. This debate comes as the climate change talks and Rio+20 are about to take place. We want the Government to go to those international negotiations with real leadership, backed up by the action that is being taken at home. That action must relate to planning policy.

It is important that this matter is considered as a cross-cutting issue. Whatever the Department for Communities and Local Government puts before Parliament has to be consistent with the policies of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department of Energy and Climate Change, so that the national policy statements about major infrastructure investments sit side by side with the localism agenda and planning policies. One problem with this consultation is that it is still being brought forward with a silo mentality. The Minister urgently needs to cross-reference it so that everything that comes about as a result of the new planning policies is consistent with the business plans of other Departments that relate to sustainable development. Otherwise, sustainable development will not underpin everything that is done.

Having made those general comments, I wish to congratulate many of the Members who have spoken, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who chairs the Communities and Local Government Committee. It is important that the Minister and Parliament take account of the scrutiny that takes place in Parliament, which is why this parliamentary debate is so important. If Parliament is to be fit for purpose, fit for the 21st century and fit to create the policies that we will need in generations to come, it is right that the Minister should give an undertaking when he responds that he will give us more time to take account of what is said by the Select Committees of the House of Commons. I am sure that the Liaison Committee will want to consider that as well.

Every Member of this House represents their constituency first and foremost. I will therefore say a brief word about an issue that relates to my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North. It is the issue of brownfield sites, which many Members including my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck) have mentioned.

I was interested that the Minister gave away the fact that the priority that there used to be to develop on brownfield sites has somehow been lost as a result of the need to prevent development in gardens. There are large industrial or former industrial parts of the country with huge amounts of brownfield site. In Stoke-on-Trent we have 175 hectares of brownfield land available for development. If we do not get the planning policy framework right, developers and property companies will cherry-pick green belt and greenfield sites.

Greg Clark *indicated dissent.*

Joan Walley: But where are the inducements to build houses in Stoke-on-Trent, where there is planning permission for them? It is not the planning permission system that is failing; it is the policies of the Treasury and other Departments. They are not ensuring that we can build the homes that are so desperately needed on brownfield sites.

I wish to mention the role of the Environmental Audit Committee. I am very pleased that we are collaborating with the Communities and Local Government Committee to examine the whole issue of planning. Our Select Committee has been charged with considering the definition of "sustainable development". That is a key issue, and Ministers from DCLG and DEFRA were before the Committee in a united stance just last week. The present Minister gave what I thought was an undertaking to go away and look at the evidence—I stress that we are examining evidence-based representations. He now needs to consider how the detailed recommendations that we will make on a definition of "sustainable development" can be integrated into the national planning policy framework before it is too late. That is critical.

Duncan Hames: The hon. Lady is recognised for her expertise on this subject. Does she agree that the reason the definition of "sustainable development" published in the draft framework has three legs is that all three of them count? It would not be satisfactory for developments to benefit from the presumption in favour of sustainable development if they were contributing to just one of those three legs and the overall net effect on sustainability was negative.

Joan Walley: This is a really complex issue, and the former Labour Government had problems with it when the legislation on regional development agencies was first introduced. There was a strong view that there should be a legal definition of the term in that legislation.

The witnesses before our Committee last week said that the Government seemed to be going backwards. We had the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, then we subsequently had the 2005 definition that was included in planning permissions. Now, with the changes that the Government are introducing in the framework, there will be no clear definition. That means that the three pillars of sustainable development—economic factors, social justice and the environment—will not be linked to any proper framework within which they can be properly assessed so that reasoned and informed decisions are made. The Government need to think carefully about a proper definition to be included in the framework and about providing clarity about what is meant by sustainable development. That needs to be matched in the Localism Bill, and sustainable development must be defined by all Government Departments and in all Government legislation.

Some other details need to be considered as the framework goes forward, one of which is how to include the long-term needs of the mineral extraction industry. At the moment, permissions are given for a 25-year period, which can provide some degree of certainty. That has to be balanced against how we define sustainable development.

Those issues cannot be properly resolved unless we have a clear, valid definition that is consistent over time. That is what we need, so when the Minister replies, he needs to set out the procedures that can be brought to bear to ensure that that is included as the national planning policy framework is taken forward.

2.50 pm

Mr James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): I declare my relevant interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Let me begin by warmly welcoming the objectives that my right hon. and hon. Friends have set out in this policy framework. This has been a good debate, in which we have seen an emerging consensus behind those objectives, even though some questions of detail have arisen. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) for supporting the objectives of the Government's planning policy framework. In fairness, questions of detail are bound to arise when, as is the case now, a Government try to simplify a policy that was previously very complex indeed. However, I strongly support the objective of simplifying planning policy as it stands.

I know that hon. Members have talked about developers, lawyers and so forth, but my experience as a constituency Member of Parliament is that the unequal playing field between developers and members of the public—as well as local authorities, with the cost that they face—has been created by the sheer complexity of the current planning system. To be fair, I am not blaming the previous Government for that; we are talking about something that has grown up over the years, under Governments of all descriptions. It is my experience that the developers turn up at planning inquiries with armies of consultants, lawyers and lobbyists, giving the impression that the system belongs to them, that there is no place for members of the public or communities to have their say and that local authorities, particularly smaller ones, are at a disadvantage, as they are always mindful of costs, something that my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) rightly mentioned.

Graham Jones: Would the hon. Gentleman therefore be in favour of a right of appeal not for the applicants, but for those whom we might consider the defendants—that is, the people objecting to an application?

Mr Clappison: That is an interesting proposition that could perhaps be considered on another day and in the fullness of time.

The hon. Gentleman will be pleased that the objective of localism has been fulfilled through the national planning policy framework, and in particular through the opportunity to establish neighbourhood plans to take into account the views of local communities. At the same time—I grasp the nettle on this issue—I welcome the planning policy framework's approach towards promoting development and growth, which is a perfectly proper consideration for such a framework. The planning system should not be, as it sometimes has been, an obstacle to appropriate and justified developments in the right place. It is a question of getting development in the right place and striking the right balance among the social, environmental and economic factors that have to be taken into account. I welcome the willingness that Ministers have shown so far, including today—they will no doubt continue to show it in future too—to listen and seek to strike the right balance among those different considerations. I understand that that is a work in progress, and I urge Ministers to continue with it.

I have heard a lot about sustainable development. Although I do not have a problem with the definition in the policy framework, I would ask Ministers to look again at the presumption in favour of sustainable development. We can all see what Ministers are trying to achieve, but more work needs to be done on how that operates throughout the planning policy framework, because the word "presumption" creates the impression that there is something that has to be rebutted. I think we know what Ministers are trying to achieve, but more work needs to be done.

I have two further points to make. The green belt is a particularly strong interest for me, as much of my constituency is covered by it. However, I am rather at a loss to understand some of the legal opinion that has been quoted about protection for the green belt, because as I read the planning policy framework, the protection for the green belt is at least as strong as in the existing documents, if not arguably stronger. I am not sure whether those who say that there is no protection against inappropriate development have got as far as paragraph 142, which states:

> "Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances."

What could be plainer than that? I welcome that plain speaking. I think that that provision is probably stronger than what were said to be the safeguards allegedly taken out by the Government, because it represents a prohibition,

> "except in very special circumstances."

[Mr Clappison]

I would ask the Government to go further than the enhanced protection that they have given to the green belt. Over the years, I have seen developers come to my constituency with ingenious arguments about what might amount to special circumstances to justify development in the green belt. Time and again, those applications have been made, and if every one had been granted, there would now be no green belt left in my constituency. I therefore ask for still further protection for the green belt.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Clappison: I will give way to my hon. Friend, because I think that that will gain me an extra minute.

Bob Stewart: When we refer to "special circumstances", are we referring to a situation in which locals really want something? Is that the way my hon. Friend would read it?

Mr Clappison: What the developers have done in the past is give their interpretation of what local people should want, but that is not what local people actually want. They can be very ingenious.

An important point about the green belt that has not yet been mentioned is that this document protects the existing green belt. The Government have abandoned the doctrine of the previous Government which stated that the loss of existing green belt could be compensated for by the designation of green belt somewhere else in the country. For example, under those rules, the green belt in Hertfordshire could be built on if that was compensated for by the designation of fresh green belt in, say, Hampshire, Herefordshire, Northamptonshire, Norfolk or somewhere else in the country. That doctrine would have resulted in the rolling development of the whole country, so I welcome the new protection.

A matter of great interest to my constituents is that of green spaces. I welcome the inclusion of that important concept in the document. Green spaces can include spaces in urban areas near to the green belt. I should like to make a plea to the Minister on behalf of my constituents. I know that the Government cannot designate green spaces everywhere, but will they be as flexible and generous as possible in that regard, because those spaces are a tremendous boon to my constituents and those of other hon. Members? I am speaking particularly on behalf of the Woodcock Hill environmental community project in my constituency, which has worked hard to establish a village green on a treasured green space that I hope will remain for many years to come, long into the future after we have all gone.

I support what the Government are trying to do, but I would also urge them to listen to the valid points that have been raised. This is work in progress and there is more to be done, but the Government are approaching the matter in the right way and getting very close to their target of fulfilling their original objectives. We should give them the support and help that they deserve as they seek to achieve their important objectives, balance them together and build a better future for our country.

2.58 pm

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr Clappison). I associate myself strongly with his comments about the protection of specific areas of green belt, as well as those about green spaces. As ever, Her Majesty's Opposition are here to help the Government get out of a hole, and it is a hole of their own making. The production of the draft national planning policy framework has been a disastrous process, and I very much hope that we will begin to see some sense from Ministers as they respond to the consultation. In fact, I think that we are beginning to see that now. It is a great pleasure to hear that they have dropped the rather abusive and unconstructive tone that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) mentioned. Talk of smear campaigns by left-wingers and "nihilistic selfishness" on the part of organisations such as the National Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Campaign to Protect Rural England does little to elevate the debate or enable us to think creatively about planning in this country.

The point of today's debate is this: the national planning policy framework as drafted threatens to undermine the very successful urban renaissance of recent years. I know that we now have a "Cities Minister" from Tunbridge Wells—that great conurbation—but even the Tory party's recent conference in Manchester should have allowed it to see the great success of Labour's "brownfield first" densification strategy of recent years. All of that could be undone by the current document because, as we have seen, it allows a series of get-out clauses for expansive free-for-all development, which will inevitably mean greenfield, if not green-belt, development. As the Home Builders Federation puts it, the NPPF allows a new presumption

"that requires local planning authorities to explain why development should not go ahead rather than placing this onus on the applicant of convincing the authority as to why it should be approved."

The HBF regards this as

"a radical change of approach".

In one sense, this should not come as a surprise, as a little history will show, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you will allow me. When we look back through the 20th century, we discover that the Conservative party in office is very rarely a friend of the countryside. In the inter-war years, we saw the remarkable expansion of ribbon development, laissez-faire sprawl and unregulated suburbanisation. England was uglified as the Tories, as usual, gave the whip hand to developers, who quickly sought to merge town and country.

Thankfully, the forces of progress intervened when, in 1926, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England was established. Then the great Herbert Morrison introduced the green belt around London and we thankfully had a Labour Government who introduced the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, the national land fund, the national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and the rolling out of the green belt—the securing of our post-war planning settlement, which separated rural from urban, town from country, which is now under threat by this new policy.

What I have described has made England what it is. Whereas the Conservative party cannot bear the idea of planning and would rather have the anywhere/nowhere sprawl of modern America—or, increasingly, of Italy and Spain—we Labour Members believe in preservation, zoning, development and planning. This is not nimbyism, but a sophisticated approach to how we should deal with planning issues. This is particularly the case, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) suggested, when we come to complicated matters of climate change and recycling.

Of course, when the Tories came back in the 1980s, they sought to undermine all that all over again. Once again we had the deregulation of planning, out-of-town shopping complexes and sprawl—the result of laissez-faire deregulation. In 1997, the tide turned again—thanks in part to my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford)—as we sought to undo the damage. Not only did my right hon. Friend sanction another national park—opposed by the Conservatives—and conserve the green belt, but the percentage of new dwellings built on brownfield land rose from 56% in 1997 to 78% in 2010. The results are there to see in our cities. In 1990, there were barely a few hundred people living in the centre of Manchester; today, there are more than 20,000. In Liverpool, the inner-urban population increased as well.

Mr Marcus Jones: The hon. Gentleman extols the virtues of the "town centre first" policy. I know that he is a well-known historian, but history tells me that that policy was adopted by the previous Conservative Government, not the Labour Government.

Tristram Hunt: We were so happy when the former Secretary of State, the former Member for Suffolk Coastal, John Gummer, saw the light. I agreed not only with his "town centre first" plans, but with his plans for the regeneration of major stately home building, although that does not make me popular on the Labour Benches. Now, however, the "brownfield first" plan is gone; planning permission is to be granted where the plan is absent, silent, indeterminate or where relevant policies are out of date. That means developers can build where and when they like. What makes the English landscape so special—that rural/urban divide and the post-war planning settlement—threatens to be undermined. It is threatened because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central said, there is no economic growth. The Government's growth strategy has collapsed, and they think that ripping up the planning process will solve the problem.

Andrew Percy: I spent 10 years as a city councillor under the previous Government's planning system, and I am afraid that I do not recognise the nirvana that the hon. Gentleman is painting. Instead, we had central Government diktat telling us what to do and where to do it, deciding that communities that wanted to grow could not grow and making us put housing where local people did not want it. That was the reality under the previous Government's planning policy.

Tristram Hunt: I know that Government Members do not believe in fact-based discussion, but the reality is that under the previous Government's planning policy, we saw an increase in house building, increasing densification and growing numbers in Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Bristol—I do not know about the great urban centre of Tunbridge Wells, but perhaps there was an increase there as well. Weak planning does not deliver strong economic growth.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is seeking to draw partisanship into the debate. Has he listened to the words of the former Labour housing Minister, Lord Rooker, in the House of Lords last week when he was introducing a debate? He said clearly:

> "I am actually with the Government on this issue…The draft planning policy nowhere near seeks to destroy our countryside, areas of outstanding natural beauty, the green belt or our vast open countryside. Those are the facts".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 October 2011; Vol. 730, c. 1836.]

Why is the hon. Gentleman trying to create contention where there is none?

Tristram Hunt: I believe in contention. I think it is a good thing. Politics results from it. I think that the noble Lord Rooker is not unfamiliar with contention either.

Deregulating planning does not deliver the kind of economic growth that the Government think it does. We have only to look at Spain, Ireland or the American states of Arizona or Nevada to realise that a strategy of ex-urban sprawl does not deliver such growth. As the Minister should know, business park vacancies currently stand at 17% and 1.6 million square feet of commercial space is free for letting. In a recent letter to the *Financial Times*, the planning adviser Paul Hackett revealed that when he was asked to investigate Treasury claims that the planning system was a barrier to growth, he

> "failed to find any convincing evidence, other than planning controls holding back speculative development by developers and out of town supermarkets and hoteliers",

that the previous system had undermined sustainable economic growth.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley) said, both her and I are privileged to represent a city facing challenges of growth, structural economic change and structural unemployment. We do not think that ending the "brownfield first" and the "town centre first" strategies will provide the kind of development, housing and businesses that we want in Stoke-on-Trent, not least because, as the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) suggested, we have 750,000 homes sitting empty and existing planning permission for 330,000 unbuilt houses. The problem for development in many situations, particularly for housing, is as much about the financial and mortgage systems as it is about the planning system.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North said, we want a proper definition of sustainable development, a return of the "brownfield first" policy—we welcome the Minister's elongated U-turn on that—the dropping of the default "yes" when a plan is out of date or silent, a recognition of the intrinsic value of the unprotected countryside, not just green belt, that covers so much of England, and a return to the "town centre first" policy and, with it, the sequential policy. All those decisions would benefit our constituents, who want not only urban regeneration in Stoke-on-Trent but the protection of the Staffordshire moorlands and the towns and villages surrounding it.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, next year marks the centenary of the death of Octavia Hill, the founder of the National Trust—perhaps she was a left-wing nihilist, although I doubt it. Instead, she believed in good housing, vibrant cities and a natural environment

[Tristram Hunt]

"for the enjoyment, refreshment, and rest of those who have no country house, but who need, from time to time, this outlook over the fair land which is their inheritance as Englishmen".

I hope that we now have a Government who believe the same.

3.9 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As others have observed, this is a good debate which raises issues that go to the heart of our communities. I pay tribute to the way in which the Minister has battled through the last few months. He has taken quite a battering from some rather hysterical media reporting, most of which has been full of misinformation.

I spent 26 years as a local councillor. During that time, like many other Members, I fought battles both for and against certain developments. I also spent six years as a cabinet member whose responsibilities included everything from roads to rubbish to licensing tattooists, and also included planning policy. A very successful coalition controlled the council—a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, I should add.

I realised during that time that the planning system was a hindrance to the development that is so desperately needed in many parts of my constituency, but protection is also needed: there has to be a balance. My constituency includes parts of the Humber estuary, a site of special scientific interest, and is on the edge of the Lincolnshire wolds, an area of outstanding natural beauty. Of course I welcome the protection that will remain in place for those areas, but my constituency also includes town centres, and they need to be protected as well. Barton-upon-Humber, for instance, is a beautiful market town with many Georgian buildings, but like all market towns it suffers from empty shops on the high streets.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend not agree that the best people to decide which areas in a given part of the country need protection and which need development, whether they are town centres or parts of the surrounding countryside, are local people? Is it not because local people have been cut out of the planning process that so few houses have been built where they need to be built, while houses have been built in areas which local people would like to be protected?

Martin Vickers: I entirely agree, but none of the measures for which I am arguing would take power away from local people. I spent most of my quarter of a century as a councillor bemoaning the fact that central Government were telling us to do this, that and the other, and not allowing us to note what local people were saying. I believe that the system that is evolving will feature widespread consultation from the bottom up, and—I hope—the making of final decisions by elected and accountable local authorities rather than distant planning inspectors. The more we are able to ensure that decisions are made locally, the more communities will be shaped in a manner of which local people approve.

On the importance of maintaining the vitality of town centres, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), shopping habits have changed and continue to change. It is a fact, regrettable in many ways, that we shall need fewer shop units in the coming years. Let me give an example from my constituency. The entrance to Cleethorpes, that beautiful seaside resort on the east coast, is to some extent blighted by a drive through an area containing parade after parade of shops, many of which are empty. Many others serve local needs, but the fact remains that we need fewer of them, and we certainly need policies that will allow those areas to regenerate themselves. I was pleased to note that the NPPF mentioned the need to remove "barriers to investment". That is one of the key developments that I hope will result from the implementation of the Government's plans.

Reference has been made to the need to speed up the system. Local plans and development frameworks take an age to proceed from A to Z. Reference has also been made to consultation. Yes, we need consultation, because we need that bottom-up feedback from local people, but we must recognise that plans need to be determined quickly. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), who represents a neighbouring constituency, I have spent much time over the past year trying to overcome the barriers to a major development in our area, caused partly by the fact that the overall process does not recognise the commercial pressures on potential investors to meet needs in the face of competing areas and, in some instances, competing countries. Speed is also essential for those who oppose developments. A week or so ago we debated High Speed 2 and the possibility that areas could be blighted for many years while waiting for decisions to be taken. Both sides need urgency, therefore.

The transition period is a concern, and I hope the Minister will spell out how areas without local plans in place will be dealt with. Many Members have also asked about the definition of sustainable. It is one of those warm and cuddly words that we are all supposed to hug to ourselves, because none of us wants our local papers to report that we support unsustainable development or want an unsustainable economy. We do need a proper definition of sustainable, however, and I ask the Minister to supply one.

Andrew Percy: We should pay tribute to those councillors who are leading on sustainability and community-led plans. As my hon. Friend knows, in our area, North Lincolnshire council—the only council to pass from Labour control to Tory control in May—has already established proper mechanisms to get communities up and running and to get community plans written up so we have them in place for when this transition happens. We should pay tribute to our hard-working councillors.

Martin Vickers: My hon. Friend, who is rapidly becoming the intervener-in-chief on the Government Benches, makes a welcome contribution to the debate, and I heartily support what he says, of course.

Despite the few caveats I have mentioned, I wholeheartedly support what the Government are doing, and the sooner they get on with it, the better.

3.17 pm

Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I represent Luton South and live in south-east England, where there is a great and pressing need for affordable housing. I am sad about the demise of the regional spatial strategies, but I appreciate that other Members do not share my opinion, and I recognise that they will not be reintroduced any time soon. They did, however, put in place a requirement for local authorities to work together to solve their housing needs.

Martin Horwood: Regional spatial strategies did not encourage local authorities to work together; they imposed things from on high. The south-west RSS took six years, cost £10 million to develop, was never implemented and attracted 35,000 objections.

Gavin Shuker: That highlights the point I have just made: Members have different opinions. I regularly knock on doors in my constituency and find people living in the most terrible circumstances, with private landlords taking advantage of them. I am torn about whether to report that to a housing department, as I know that there is such limited housing stock. It is therefore worth looking at different areas in different ways.

There is a quiet crisis in housing across the south-east in particular, but also in other areas. I am certainly not opposed to simplifying the planning system; one of our jobs as Members of Parliament is to simplify things. However, to slim down a 1,000-page brain surgery manual, as it were, to just 60 pages is not the best way to proceed. The best way to proceed is to say that we want to have more housing and more localism, and that we want people to have choices in decisions affecting their own constituencies and communities. We want to do that sensibly, however, which is why this debate has been very good so far.

Many of today's speeches have been wish lists of various items about which people are concerned, and mine will be no different. I have specific concerns about a number of areas and I hope that the Minister will respond to them consensually at the end of the debate.

My first concern relates to sustainable development, about which we have heard from Members on both sides of the House. I have counted four or perhaps five possible definitions of "sustainable development" published either by this Government or previous ones. I have shadowed the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team and seen sustainability go from being the sole remit of one Department to being mainstreamed. The Department for Communities and Local Government has been one of the major winners from that. As I have shadowed the DEFRA team, I know that DCLG has probably scored more points against DEFRA than Labour Members have, and that applies on various things, including bin taxes. There is uncertainty about "sustainable development" and its definition, and it is important that the body of this policy framework defines incredibly clearly what that is. Brundtland's work obviously provides a good starting point, but the tighter the definition the easier it will become for planning applications to go through and for us not to end up with things in court for six or seven years when the definition could be clearly set out from the start. If we want more affordable housing, we need to be clear and exact in our definitions—that is a great place to start.

The Attlee Government enacted sites of special scientific interest in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, and we have been clear about wanting to maintain those protections. The chief executive of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Mike Clarke, has stated:

> "One thing the final plans must state clearly is protection from development for some of the nation's finest wildlife sites—those areas designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. We have received legal advice this week which suggests that the proposals as they stand will weaken protection for these areas."

Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that SSSIs and areas of outstanding natural beauty result from environmental legislation, not the planning process?

Gavin Shuker: I am not entirely clear on the hon. Lady's point.

Sheryll Murray: We are discussing the NPPF, which I understand will not do anything about the existing SSSIs and AONBs.

Gavin Shuker: I am happy to clear that up for the hon. Lady, as I do not believe that is the case. The NPPF does not abolish any of those things, but the RSPB, which has taken independent legal advice, has suggested that it might "weaken protection" for those areas. For that reason, it is incredibly important that we get this right, as Members on both sides of the House would want to make sure that the best protections are in place.

In a former life—if it is indeed possible to have a former life after only 18 months in this House—I shadowed on forestry for the Opposition. I have concerns about the effect of this framework on forests. We know that DEFRA has made a forced U-turn on the issue and we are all awaiting the findings of the interim report by Bishop James Jones on forestry in the next few months. I am concerned that the presumed "yes", which does not apply to ancient woodland—that is a good move and we are very positive about it—applies to other woodland. We have particular concerns about the effect on areas such as the Forest of Dean. Normally, we grow trees, chop them down and then allow them to grow back, but the areas left fallow may be subjected to the conditional "yes"—the presumed "yes"—to sustainable development. It is very important that we examine that in more detail.

One other area of particular interest to my constituents and to those of many hon. Members is protecting village and town greens. I live in a constituency that has one of the highest population densities in the country. We know that it is important that we do not just have urban sprawl and that green areas and green spaces need to be protected in our towns. I welcome the protections for green areas and green spaces, but to ask local communities to get together to raise the money to protect those spaces—the consultation suggested it could cost £1,000 just to get the process started—might not be the best possible way to proceed.

Let me turn to a few other areas of the legislation. I was pleased to hear the Minister's warm words on brownfield. I hope he will define it more clearly as time goes on and give us the opportunity to respond on his reworded NPPF on brownfield sites. We understand that brownfield is important; last year 76% of homes

[Gavin Shuker]

built across the country were on brownfield sites. The policy was working well, so we need to be careful if we tinker with it.

In summary, I want development. I want to see more affordable homes and I want to see people living with what they deserve in a country that, despite the current austerity, remains one of the richest in the world—that is, a decent home, a decent job and green and pleasant space to enjoy wherever they live, whether it is the countryside or the town. There is a difference, however, between brevity and clarity in the planning framework, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) pointed out. In the rush to brevity, we must not overlook the need for clarity, which is the best way of ensuring that planning decisions are taken in a timely fashion and in the right way.

In my area, the local core strategy is split between two different areas—Central Bedfordshire and Luton—that, regrettably, could not agree on the local plan. Central Bedfordshire has adopted its plan, but Luton remains unprotected against predatory and subjective applications. I hope that the transitional arrangements will ensure that local authorities are given time to put core strategies and local plans in place to protect their areas. Otherwise, my fear is that we will not deliver on the promise on which we were elected to this House—to ensure that people have decent homes, decent jobs and a pleasant environment to enjoy.

3.26 pm

Mr Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton South (Gavin Shuker), as always. The subject of planning and development, and more recently the national planning policy framework, matters a great deal to my constituents in Winchester and Chandler's Ford—and that is an understatement. If I was in any doubt about that fact, the past few months, as the ministerial team knows, have clarified matters somewhat.

At the end of September, we had the long-awaited decision of the Secretary of State in response to the planning inspector's recommendation for 2,000 homes on the now infamous Barton Farm site, owned by CALA Homes. In the words of the Secretary of State in his decision document,

> "a decision to grant planning permission is likely to undermine the process of Blueprint which is clearly an important policy objective for Winchester and, as the Inspector notes, the community has contributed considerable time and effort to this process".

That is called localism and I have no doubt whatsoever that had that decision been taken by a Secretary of State in the previous Government, it would have been rubber-stamped and once again key decisions affecting my constituents would have been taken over their heads.

It would have been quite wrong for the planning inspector, or even the Secretary of State, to make the decision and it has now returned to where it should always have been—in the hands of democratically elected local councillors. As I have made clear many times, localism does not mean saying no any more than it means an automatic yes. It simply means a local decision, taken by local people, with a clear and transparent evidence base, in the local interest and—this is the key point—by local politicians who are accountable at the ballot box. That might be an uncomfortable position for some councillors and I am sure it was far easier when Ministers took the flak, but the new way must be right. It is what I and many colleagues campaigned on for many years before entering this House and I want to be clear in saying today that I still believe in localism—and Father Christmas.

Since publication of the NPPF in August, there has been clarification of the strength of feeling on the issue in my constituency. I agree with the coalition Government's commitment to decentralising power and making the planning process more accessible. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who I have known for many years and who brings an enormous amount of personal credibility to this subject. I know that he wants to get this right for all our sakes.

I think that my constituents want their councillors and community groups to use the planning system for properly planned growth in their neighbourhoods and, equally, to protect what they hold dear about them. Somewhere, the process of localism has stumbled in recent months and it has not yet secured the confidence of the many highly informed organisations and individuals in my constituency, such as the Alresford society, the city of Winchester trust and the Winchester city residents association, to name just a few groups. Among the very thoughtful and sensible individuals who regularly bring their many years of experience to their local Member of Parliament, two names that spring to mind are Keith Storey and Bob Howland—and I thank them for that.

The NPPF presents an opportunity, when the Government respond to their consultation, to replace what I see as qualified localism with a purer form of localism. Paragraph 48 of the NPPF sets out the requirement to meet

> "unmet requirements from neighbouring authorities where it is practical to do so".

I have to say that deep unease about this has been conveyed to me locally. Winchester city council has undertaken a great deal of cross-boundary work, through the development of joint studies, where there are common issues to be explored, and it is an active partner in the partnership for urban south Hampshire, known as PUSH. It is rightly concerned, and has expressed its concerns to me, that local authorities are not likely to be able or willing to provide for the development requirements of a neighbouring local authority and that it is an unreasonable requirement for local unmet needs to be picked up by neighbouring authorities.

Paragraph 109 contains the requirement to provide an additional 20% of specific deliverable sites within a five-year housing supply to allow for choice and competition. There has been much talk about that this afternoon. The NPPF should make it clear that the identification of sites for housing and the maintenance of a rolling supply is a monitoring issue rather than a development target. The 20% addition is unnecessary and should go.

There has been much focus on the now iconic phrase

> "presumption in favour of sustainable development".

I find this slightly odd because there is and always has been a presumption that an application will receive planning permission unless it is contrary to national or local planning policies. If it is refused, clear "material" reasons for the refusal must be given. That is where we have been for many years. However, to require "sustainable" development assumes that this is a black-and-white issue and that a development is either sustainable or not. The criteria used to assess sustainable development in the NPPF, and in the Localism Bill, cover economic, social and environmental issues. If the NPPF is to promote the concept of sustainable development—and I know that that is the wish—it should set out a clear definition with a list of desirable factors that need to be satisfied. As the city of Winchester trust says in its response to the consultation, and as it has said to me, the word "sustainable" is used so many times in the draft document that it comes across more as a brand than as a matter of substance. Town and country planning is, in the trust's view, a discipline that is based on weighing up all the material issues, and then making a judgment. The trust goes on to say that there should be a presumption in favour of development that complies with adopted national and local planning policy—and I have to say that its Member of Parliament agrees.

Paragraph 165 of the NPPF states that local plans should allocate, first,

> "land with the least environmental or amenity value".

I think that Ministers feel that this is the way in which the NPPF says "brownfield first", but we do not have the luxury of subtlety. If that is what we mean, we should say so and be clear in the document.

My reading of the NPPF shows an inconsistency between the desire for what it calls "succinct Local Plans" and the presumption in favour of sustainable development. It states that planning permission should be granted where the plan is "absent, silent" or "indeterminate" on a point. Surely, that will steer plan makers towards producing plans that deal with every eventuality to ensure that plans are not silent on, or fail to deal with, a possible development proposal. That suggests that local plans will need to be very detailed and comprehensive rather than succinct.

That leads me to another question: what are the transitional arrangements and will the Minister say whether an emerging plan will have sufficient weight as emerging policy to ensure that my constituents are not wide open? Finally, will he confirm beyond doubt that when a local plan is agreed and in place it has primacy? If it does not, we will have not the pure localism that I mentioned, or even qualified localism, but localism that does not mean very much at all.

In conclusion, planning is, as the NPPF rightly says, about a balance of economic, social and environmental issues. Almost every correspondence I have had on the subject has made the point that the repeated emphasis on economic growth in the document creates a slightly unbalanced document and ignores or understates the other two considerations. It should be left to individual local authorities to determine how much weight and emphasis should be given to economic considerations when framing their plans and taking decisions. So, I make a simple plea that we should trust local people—I think the Minister is absolutely right and he knows that I have campaigned alongside him on this for many years—believe in localism in its truest form and let people get on with the job.

3.34 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I speak today as someone who has spent four years of my life dealing with the planning system in London. Before becoming an MP, I was a councillor in Lewisham and had responsibility for regeneration. I worked with planners, with developers and with the community, and I can say that in some ways it was the best job of my life and in others the worst.

I know how controversial planning applications can be, and I know how fiercely people will defend their own interests. There is nothing wrong with that, but someone, somewhere has to take a decision about the wider interests of the community, and indeed the wider interests of the country. Sometimes that will fall to councillors, but sometimes the responsibility will stop at the door of the Government. I have a real concern that on the evidence of the past 18 months this Government are not up to the task. They want to wash their hands of the task of setting out a vision of where in the country new homes will be built and where new jobs will be created. They talk about sustainable development but fail to provide an adequate definition. They hide behind a smokescreen of empowering communities through neighbourhood plans, but then use the planning system as a political football to justify the lack of economic growth.

In my view, the planning system is a vital tool in helping to create places where people want to live.

Henry Smith: Will not the hon. Lady concede that during the last decade and a bit of the previous Government, despite the massive top-down, centrally planned housing targets, house building fell to its lowest level since the 1920s? How does she reconcile those two things?

Heidi Alexander: I know that the hon. Gentleman has not been here for the whole debate. We have heard convincing evidence from a number of hon. Members about how house building and, most importantly, the building of affordable houses increased over the last decade.

I was setting out why I believe the planning system is so important. It is one of the only ways in which we can determine where to locate the things that we all need but perhaps do not like, such as places to deal with our rubbish and noisy hospitals with lots of traffic. It is also one of the only ways in which we can start to change how we live in the future. It is a simple fact that we need fewer cars on our roads. That will happen only if the jobs of tomorrow are located in places where public transport is good and if new homes are built in places where people can walk to the shops. That is what sustainable development is about. It is not just about shiny bits of eco kit on buildings; it is about how we live our lives. It is about investment in our town centres, making the most of brownfield land in our cities and protecting those parts of the countryside that we all hold dear.

The Government tell us that the planning system is a brake on economic growth and that planners are the enemies of enterprise. That is rubbish. In 2010-11, 86% of planning applications were approved, and 90% of commercial applications were approved. In London, planning permission exists for 170,000 homes on which work has yet to start. It is not the planning system that is stopping those homes being built; it is the availability of developer and mortgage finance.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The hon. Lady speaks of 86% of planning applications having been approved, but does she have information on how many times those applicants have been round the block? In my experience, what tends to happen is that people apply once, get refused and have to apply again, having changed something. That is what we mean by a brake that is slowing the process.

Heidi Alexander: I do not have the figures that the hon. Lady requests, but I was about to go on to say that we need to look at more than planning policy; we need to look at the planning process. That may address one of the issues that she touches on.

I accept that it can take a long time to get planning applications approved, but we have to make sure that there are enough resources in council planning departments to deal with applications speedily and sort out, at the outset, some of the problems to which the hon. Lady refers. We all know that council and, indeed, planning department budgets are coming under huge pressure as a result of the Government's austerity programme.

We also have to look at perceptions of the planning system and do more to encourage developers and planners to work more collaboratively. I say this as a politician: one of the biggest frustrations for developers is the politics in all this, such as the planning application that gets stuck in a council a year before an election and is not decided. A whole range of issues impact on problems with the planning system. The Government are wrong to look at planning policy on its own, and it is wrong to assume that a slimline version of the NPPF is the answer to the country's economic woes.

It is wrong to assume, too, that just because the NPPF is much shorter than previous planning guidance it is any clearer—a point that has been made in our debate. There is a real danger that the NPPF is a blank cheque for planning lawyers. As Simon Jenkins pointed out when he gave evidence to the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government this week, the document is littered with adverbs. On the basis of the NPPF, developers can argue for "acceptable" returns. Acceptable to whom? Something that is acceptable to me is probably very different from something that is acceptable to the chairman of a big house-builder. The document refers to the fact that councils can refuse applications where the adverse affects "significantly" and "demonstrably" outweigh the benefits. If ever there was a word for lawyers to fight over, surely "significantly" is it. The document is sloppy and ambiguous, and it could have a raft of unintended consequences.

My other main concern about the NPPF relates to whether it does enough to address some of the big challenges that we face as country. Let us take the example of affordable housing. The framework does away with previous targets for the amount of affordable housing that should be provided by developers when they are building schemes where the majority of homes are for sale on the open market. It is left to councils to decide whether they have such targets. It is the same for the threshold for when any affordable housing requirement must kick in: local councils can decide. That is not to mention the issue of what constitutes "affordable housing", or how housing requirements are properly assessed.

Mark Pawsey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Heidi Alexander: I have given way several times, and I am conscious that many Members wish to speak.

The housing needs of my constituents in Lewisham are not going to be met in Lewisham alone. If every house built in Lewisham over the next 10 years was an affordable home—and I mean genuinely affordable—we would still not solve our housing crisis. There has to a Government plan to deal with this. There is not, and on the basis of the NPPF, I fear that the problem will just get worse.

I question the usefulness of a document that contains stronger stipulations about the habitats of birds than it does on, say, housing for the elderly. There is a one-word reference to the way in which councils should take into account the housing needs of older people, compared with a very clear statement about sites protected under the birds and habitats directives. I am not against the inclusion of clear guidance on bird habitats, but I am against the absence of clear guidance on planning for the enormous demographic challenges that our country faces.

Before I conclude, I should like to touch on the apparent contradiction between the NPPF and the Government's supposed commitment to giving local people more say over what happens in their neighbourhood. During our deliberations on the Localism Bill, I said that neighbourhood plans would serve to stoke up communities' expectations about their ability to say "no" to development in their area—a nimby's charter. However, according to the Government, the default answer to development should be yes. How can the two be compatible?

I put it to the Government that they have over-hyped localism. Neighbourhood plans have been sold on a false prospectus. They will not deliver power to communities to define the sort of development that they want to see in their area, as neighbourhood plans have generally to conform with the council's strategic plan, which in turn must be consistent with the NPPF requirements on meeting housing need. The only way neighbourhood plans will work is if communities ask for lots and lots of new homes to be built. They may well do so in Tunbridge Wells, but that is not my experience in Lewisham.

In conclusion, the Government appear to have a laudable "consensus" view of planning. They believe that local people, working with local authorities, will ultimately deliver plans that meet the needs of the nation as a whole. I am not so sure that they will. Planning is ultimately a mechanism to resolve fierce competition over a finite resource. Judgments must be made in a balanced way, and consideration must be given to the environment and society, as much as to the economy. Planning policy and guidance has a role to play in setting out how those decisions are taken. Yes, planning policy could and should be streamlined, but let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. As a local civic amenities society in my constituency, the Culverley Green residents association, stated in an e-mail to me this week:

> "Revision is a reasonable option but a bonfire is not."

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. To accommodate more Members, the time limit on speeches is being reduced to five minutes. That is a ceiling, so Members should not feel that it is necessary to fill the five minutes, as others wish to speak.

3.45 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to today's debate, which holds great significance for my constituents. I want to explain why I support the Government's general approach in the draft NPPF and point to areas where I think it could be honed and improved. If the Government take on those suggestions, it might allay some of my constituents' current concerns. To do that, we need to assess where we are coming from, with regard to the current planning system, and to consider where the proposals will lead our communities and how our communities will engage in the planning process in future.

The current system—the previous Government's approach—was quite simple: there were top-down targets, with the Government deciding numbers, and local people could decide where to impose the Government's will. It was a classic "Government knows best" approach. I applaud the current Government on their approach of freeing up local communities to set their own course and allowing them to set a local vision. It gives local people a real say in planning that vision and more control over their own destiny, which I think is incumbent on a Government led by the Conservative party.

It will be a day of liberation when the Localism Bill receives Royal Assent and the ghastly regional spatial strategies, which many of my constituents have feared for years, disappear. However, I fear that before we get planning liberation several of the local communities I represent might be caught with unwanted developments as a result of a lack of coherence in the planning strategy of the Labour-controlled Nuneaton and Bedworth borough council, where contradictory assessments of housing need have already lead to one unwanted development being imposed by the Planning Inspectorate.

We must also recognise that although locally based planning is vital, for consistency of approach we also need a strong national framework. I am encouraged by the draft NPPF that the Government have put before us and by their intention to balance the important concept of local planning with the fact that we are all living longer, more of us want to live apart than together and that we all need those homes for our children for the future, which is a major concern in many constituencies.

The draft NPPF cuts the current guidance down to size and puts it into a format that can be understood not only by planners in town halls, but by the communities we all serve. It is clear that if people put their local plans in place and get all their ducks in a row, based on clear evidence, their communities will be protected from speculative developers and the will of the Planning Inspectorate. It is clear that the local plan will hold primacy. However, I have some suggestions for the Government.

First, the NPPF contains a carrot-and-stick approach; the presumption in favour of sustainable development being the stick, and the fact that the presumption will not be effective if an evidenced-based plan is in place being the carrot. The Government must honour that principle, because some planning authorities are more advanced in putting together their local plans than others. We cannot have an indefinite and open-ended situation in which local authorities decide not to put local plans in place, but I think that we should give them the opportunity to put their local plans in place as quickly as possible by allowing a transitional period in which they can do that. I welcome the comments that the Minister made on that this afternoon.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jones: I am sorry; unfortunately, because of the time I have left, I cannot give way.

Local plans must be based on up-to-date local evidence; they must not be predicated just on figures hanging around from the RSS if they are not appropriate to the local community. I hope that the inspectors who check those plans and the evidence base in them will look at truly local evidence, and do so with a fresh set of eyes, not through regional spatial strategy-tinted spectacles. I fear that, if the Government do not make sure of that, it will come back to haunt many of our communities.

3.50 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): There have been many good contributions today, and many points have been made, but in the short time that we have been squeezed into I want to focus on some issues in Hyndburn.

First, the north is not the south, and one cap does not fit all. The pressure in the national planning policy framework to build, and the under-supply of housing in the south which is driving that, will simply cause problems in Hyndburn.

Secondly, the framework document exists in a vacuum, ignoring other Government policies on sustainable communities, health outcomes and the effects of brownfield sites in areas such as mine, which are of predominantly low value and experience low demand. The consequences of concentrating development on those sites will be detrimental.

Gavin Shuker: Does my hon. Friend agree that the complexity he mentions is a primary reason why, when the framework comes back to the House, we need a full, affirmative vote on it ?

Graham Jones: Yes, I do, and that was a very good intervention.

Given that this is a housing supply-side problem, I have every sympathy with the Government's presumption in favour of sustainable development, and they are attempting to achieve what the previous Government also tried.

Parts of the national planning policy framework are to be welcomed, particularly the removal of brownfield targets for housing; the protection of community facilities in inner-urban areas; green space designation, which the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr Clappison) mentioned and which should be used as a tool to green our towns and cities; and the issue of Traveller sites, which I do not wish to go into but do support.

Mrs Glindon: My hon. Friend mentions several things that could be included in the document, but many hon. Members have said that empty housing should be included more forcefully. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Graham Jones: Absolutely. My hon. Friend has obviously seen an advance copy of my speech.

The planning document is crude, and I want to highlight some of its failings, which I hope the Minister will consider. I accept that in some areas of the south there is an insufficient availability of housing land, but I do not want to say any more about the southern dilemma. I want to reflect on why the framework will not work in Hyndburn and some of the old industrial towns of the north.

In the document, there are two particular spatial planning failures. The first is on empty homes, and it was raised by the hon. Members for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) and for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), and by my hon. Friends the Members for North Tyneside and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). The issue clearly has cross-party support, but there is nothing substantial about it in the NPPF. There should be, and we should do more about it. In my constituency there are 2,500 empty homes, and those properties must be part of any housing consideration. The national planning policy must include a presumption—of first preference, I would argue—that they are brought back into use. Brownfield and greenfield sites should be somewhat secondary.

The national planning policy framework also takes a blanket view on sustainable development. Unmanaged sustainable development will not abate the over-supply of housing in my constituency but exacerbate the problem.

Secondly, there is the issue of old factory sites in my constituency and the gaping hole in the definition of sustainability, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) mentioned. "Sustainability" is quite a loose word in the document, and I am concerned about that, because it does not recognise some of the important aspects of sustainable communities which go beyond housing. Put simply, inner-urban brownfield development can be a disaster for poor and deprived communities, and there is a case in some areas for a policy of no more urban infill. We need a framework that alleviates the problems of an ageing stock where there is de-population, a static population or sufficient housing.

Hyndburn is a constituency where 89% of people live in an urban area, and in many neighbourhoods there is a lack of open space and recreational areas. As hon. Members are probably aware, it has row after row of terraced housing sitting by derelict former mills and factories, now classed as brownfield sites, for which housing planning permission is frequently sought. It comes as no surprise that Hyndburn has one of the lowest rates of physical activity for adults in England. It has consistently been in the lowest 25% of all localities as regards adults having 30 minutes of physical activity three times a week. Consequently, it has poor and/or chronic health statistics. The impact of this national planning policy framework on health and lifestyle inequalities cannot be underestimated.

The previous "brownfield first" presumption on which much of this debate focuses favours the rich and privileged on the urban fringes and works against the urban poor. It is not fair to maintain an expectation that the poor who neighbour many old brownfield sites should shoulder the burden of housing development. It is no wonder that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening when the national planning policy framework sits in a policy vacuum where it has no relation to, and works against, the objectives of other Government Departments.

Health inequalities are widening. The Prime Minister's happiness index would do well to reflect the national planning policy framework as regards some of these sites. If the Government are serious about putting forth an agenda of improving the health of our people, they must resist the further crowding of densely populated urban areas by brownfield developmental pressure. A free-for-all urban infill based on gross housing need simply will not work in my constituency.

To put that in perspective, 60% of the terraced houses in my constituency sit cheek by jowl with old unwanted industrial sites. For the past 20 years, I have lived in one of the most deprived wards where, as one would expect, there are all the social problems that the Government wish to address. We must resist a "brownfield first" presumption of development of such former industrial sites. One of those in my neighbourhood stands out as a particularly good example, as it is turned over to housing. It is surrounded by old Victorian property that sells for £40,000 per house. Many properties have been boarded up or are empty; most of the remainder are in the hands of landlords who do not really care much for the area. I am sure that hon. Members understand the issues. The pressure to release the brownfield site resulted in a successful housing application to build what can only be described as the slums of tomorrow. No one is willing to develop a former industrial site in a poor area with five-bedroom luxury homes and open space, and the national planning policy framework will not prevent that from continuing. I hope that the Minister will address my concerns.

3.57 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): We have learned this afternoon of the momentous news from Libya of the death of Colonel Gaddafi. On Sunday, the European Heads of Government meet to consider the eurozone crisis, and we have our own debate on this issue on Monday. Parliament often considers these great matters of state and international affairs, but often our work as Members of Parliament is more drawn to the issues that we have covered in today's debate. Planning issues that shape people's lives and communities are the bread and butter of our work as Members of Parliament and the work of this House. It is a timely debate, and it has been interesting and illuminating to hear from colleagues from all around the country of their own experiences of planning. I will also draw briefly on my own experiences.

There has been much reference to the position of the National Trust as against that of the Government. The National Trust's manifesto for planning states:

> "Effective planning should promote good development, which contributes to prosperity and growth."

I think that every one of us would agree with that. It is totally consistent with the policies set out by the Government and with having planning based on good local plans that include a sound assessment of local economic need and of the needs of local individuals.

Some of the remarks by Labour Members have presented us with a false dilemma and a false challenge that is not borne out by people's experience. It is suggested that development would take place in urban centres only if it were required and incentivised by the Government, and that development out of urban areas is unnecessary and promoted only because it may be cheap and expedient. Those of us who represent urban and rural communities are aware that such development can be a very important trigger for bringing in investment and helping to stimulate the local economy. That applies just as much to small rural villages and seaside towns, such as Folkestone in my constituency, as to major urban centres.

Over a number of years, Labour and Conservative Governments have pursued a strategy of urban and civic renewal and many of our major cities have benefited from that consensus. However, we should also consider the need for development in rural communities, such as the villages in the middle of Romney Marsh in my constituency. I had a meeting with representatives of Newchurch parish council, which is right in the middle of Romney Marsh. They expressed their frustration that they had been blocked in trying to get planning permission for a small amount of rural development in the village which might have made the community more sustainable. People with rural constituencies will be familiar with such planning concerns.

It has been suggested in this debate that the regional spatial strategies ensured that a certain amount of housing development took place, and that without them it simply would not have happened. However, many Members will be aware that the local authorities in their constituencies have been keen to pursue a strategy for growth. Shepway district council, which covers 90% of my constituency, has set growth plans for housing that exceed the levels set in the regional spatial strategies. It understands that sensible and sustainable development can play an important role in stimulating the local economy. When that is welcomed by the community, it should be welcomed by all. I think that people realise that.

The new homes bonus is helpful because it gives local authorities a means of compensating a local community and addressing the concerns that it may have about the dilution of the quality of local services because of additional development. That is money that councils can control. For a district authority, a development of even several thousand housing units over a number of years could bring a substantial reward to the local community in investment.

Development can also support the delivery of local services, particularly the roll-out of broadband services, which are often a complaint in more remote parts of the country. The investment from the developer that comes into the community can help the roll-out and expansion of broadband services and other services. There is a lot that we can commend.

I will touch on one aspect of planning policy and of major infrastructure planning policy in particular that has affected my constituency: the planning of new nuclear planning stations. The previous Government were remiss in not allowing local economic decisions to be considered in the site-specific report. In my constituency, a new power station at Dungeness would have been of considerable benefit to the local economy. It has been held back because of planning restraints to do with nature conservation on the site around the power station. It would be welcome if the Government revisited those regulations. They are largely based on European law. In this case, they are not welcomed by the community and have put a barrier on development at the site. We should look again to see if there is the flexibility to revisit the way in which such regulations are imposed. Communities change, and the nature of regulations may no longer suit the needs of the local economy and community. We should always keep a vigilant eye on that.

4.2 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. When I was first elected as an MP, one of the older hands advised me to steer clear of planning applications and leave them to councillors because we have no power over them. I have singularly failed to follow that instruction, but then I have had two open-cast mines, a gasification plant and consultations on various supermarkets to deal with in my constituency. It has not been an issue that I could have kept out of.

Seven years as a district councillor taught me that the planning system is far too complex and that neither local people nor developers really get what they want. We tend to get a nationally enforced plan with a nationally enforced target. The council then sets a local plan and turns down applications on valid planning grounds, but then the inspectors approve them anyway. That is the worst of all worlds. What we want is clarity so that everyone can understand what should be approved and what should not. If something is turned down validly, the decision ought to stick.

I want to discuss two issues: the green belt and mineral planning. The last thing that any of us wants is to lose any green belt, which is so valuable to our communities. One thing that is certain is that once it is gone, it is unlikely to ever come back. There is one encouraging remark in the draft framework in paragraph 137:

> "Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances."

I wholeheartedly agree with that. Green belt should be changed only where it absolutely has to be. I urge my local council to bear that in mind as it looks at options for future housing development.

David Tredinnick: Does my hon. Friend agree that we also have to protect green wedges and agricultural blocks to avoid urban communities coming together? That is the case in Hinckley, in my Leicestershire constituency.

Nigel Mills: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and reiterate that point. One of the key advantages for the green belt set out in the framework is that communities will be prevented from being merged and our distinct historic communities will be maintained. When there have been threats to the green belt in my constituency in recent years, either real or rumoured, the local people have come together strongly to fight the loss. I have seen that in the village of Shipley with the Hardy Barn development, with the threats to the old American Adventure site and with the Lodge House open-cast mine in Smalley, which was sadly approved last week. There are matters still to be decided in Heage and in the villages around the Cinderhill development, where the council removed some green-belt land to try to encourage the cleaning up of an old, contaminated site.

More recently, in Ripley, the council has consulted on whether to sell land for another supermarket. I strongly welcome the framework's stating that if councils are willing to consider out-of-town development such as

[Nigel Mills]

supermarkets, they need to bear in mind the damage that would be done to existing shops in the town centre not just for a short period but for 10 years, when the supermarket grows and gets more popular. That is especially important because these days supermarkets sell not just food but newspapers, books and clothes and have a pharmacy, a mobile phone shop and an optician. Almost nothing in a town centre can compete if there is a supermarket like that.

The key thing for the Government now is to get the emphasis right and ensure that the green belt is strongly protected by the framework. That should come right at the start of the plan. We should say, "Okay, we have a presumption in favour of sustainable development, but we also have a strong presumption against development in the green belt." We do not want councils to reduce the size of the green belt when they set their local plans.

I wish to mention mineral extraction. It is worth reiterating that what we put in the framework is what developers will quote when they submit their planning applications, and they will want decisions to be enforced based on it. If councils try to go beyond what is in it, there will be a real risk of successful appeal. I strongly believe that we have the balance wrong on mineral extraction. The section on minerals states first, in paragraph 103, that "significant weight" must be given to

> "the benefits of the mineral extraction",

but then paragraph 106 states that there is a presumption against the extraction of coal. I would have thought that that presumption against it should come right at the start, so that we all know we are starting from that point, especially in the case of green-belt sites. Then we could consider circumstances in which that presumption could be overturned and approval granted, so conditions could be set to ensure that excessive damage was not done to people living near the sites in question.

That is where it gets complicated for a council assessing applications. There is no guidance in the draft framework on what noise levels are acceptable at such sites. There is a comment that when a site is started, a noise level that is not generally acceptable may occur, because it is unavoidable given the blasting needed to set the site up. However, there is no comment on how long that noise can go on or how excessive it may be. If I were the applicant, I might think that six months was a short time for a four-year site, but if I were living next door to it I might think that 30 minutes was far too long for excessive noise. It will be very hard for a council to interpret that provision if there is no national guidance. Although I wholeheartedly support the need to slim down the guidance, we need some clarity about what is and is not acceptable in that situation.

I refer Ministers to the private Member's Bill on open-cast mining separation zones, and to the amendments that I tabled to the Localism Bill to try to ensure separation. People need to be sure how close to their house a mine can be. A mine that was approved in my constituency is just over 200 metres from someone's back door, which is far too close, especially given that open-cast mining was taken out of the neighbourhood planning process in the Localism Bill. Local communities have no protection against that.

I conclude by saying that I wholeheartedly support the simplification of the system but that some refinements to the details are still needed.

4.8 pm

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): The Minister is quite familiar with my constituency, given that he has been kind enough to speak to members of my association a number of times, so it will come as no surprise to him when I say that I have received more than 130 letters on the NPPF, or that more than four organisations in my constituency have contributed to the consultation. As he is aware, it is in a part of the country where people are focused on shaping the places in which they live and building their communities. They are doing that in many parts of the country, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said earlier.

In the brief time available to me I want to focus on just two points. However, I would like first to thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for agreeing to meet the organisations in my constituency that are concerned about the NPPF. They include Tandridge district council, CPRE Tandridge, CPRE Surrey, the Oxted and Limpsfield residents group, Reigate and Banstead council, Nutfield residents association and Woldingham parish council, which are just a few of those that we could fit into one meeting. I thank my right hon. Friend for being open to meeting them.

Although I understand the need to simplify the planning system, the need for house building, the need for localism and the need to stimulate growth, my main consideration is the core strategy and how it will work. We have had a core strategy in Tandridge district council since 2008, and many hours have been spent developing it. The main concern now is that the transitional provisions would still leave a period of uncertainty, so why do we not let the core strategies, in which so much time has been invested, be tested out there, rather than completely overruling them?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. He started by talking about how many of his constituents care very much about this issue. Does he agree that it is therefore a great shame that although we have heard some powerful speeches from the Opposition, there now appear to be just three Opposition Members in the Chamber for this important debate? It may not be a debate about matters of state, but as he knows, it is about an issue of great concern to all our constituents.

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for her point, which has been well noted in *Hansard*.

The concern about the core strategy is that developers might take councils to appeal on every planning application because of the fact that their core strategies were developed in different times, when demands were different, and thus are not in line with the NPPF, which focuses mainly on economic needs. I seek assurances from the Minister on how consistent the transition period will be with the core strategies that have been worked on for so long.

East Surrey is 94% green belt. Again, I already know of two sites in Oxted that have been bought by developers in anticipation of the rules being relaxed. As they see it, they will be able to develop on green-belt land, which is causing a lot of anxiety among my constituents. My suggestion for the Minister is that it might be better to incentivise developers to build on brownfield sites, because we already know where they are in our core strategy and that would cause less anxiety to my constituents.

Those are my two principal points for the Minister. I again thank him for being open to meeting the groups that I have mentioned, but I would also like reassurance from him that the NPPF will protect the core strategy and the green belt. I am conscious that the consultation has just finished and that he might not be able to give me all the assurances that I need, but I would like to hear his comments about those matters.

4.13 pm

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): Top-down, imposed on communities; done to people, not with them; reflecting the ambitions of regional quangos, not local circumstances; adversarial, pitting communities against each other and individuals against developers; lop-sided; not transparent; appeal-led; not delivering on the ground—that is where we are today with the current planning system. It is absolutely right that the Government should seek to reform it, and I welcome that. My belief is that the combination of the Localism Bill and the national planning policy framework will deliver an inclusive process that will bring people together, enabling a plan-led approach where developers and communities get round the table together to work out what is in their neighbourhood's best interest. Such an approach will be bottom-up, secure consent, take conflict out of the system and finally be transparent in a way that it has not been until now.

I have a great deal of sympathy for what is in the NPPF and the way it relates to the Localism Bill and the need to simplify national guidance and be clear about the need for sustainable development. However, we also need to ensure that development is well planned and genuinely sustainable, and that we create a planning system that delivers attractive communities in the right places, not endless cul de sacs that, although they might cumulatively occupy a large amount of space, fail to deliver the places that people want to live in. Such places need schools and pubs, leisure facilities and green spaces. I agree with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley) that we need a clearer definition of "sustainable development" in the NPPF. We need to ensure that the provisions cover economic, social and environmental concerns together, and that no one leg of that tripod is given too much prominence.

A second major principle of the NPPF is the presumption in favour of sustainable development. I think that I understood my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr Brine) correctly when he said that the first presumption that he wanted to see in the NPPF was that development should be carried out according to local plans. He said that that should be the bottom line; it should be where we start from. That is very much the Government's intention, and it would be useful to make that slightly clearer in the proposals.

As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, when the NPPF is finalised, all existing unadopted local plans, as well as those that are in an advanced stage of preparation, will technically be out of date. As a result, the presumption in favour of sustainable development will apply to all development proposals when the contents of the NPPF become the de facto policy across the country. As I understand it, that will remain the position until local plans are updated to reflect the guidelines in the new NPPF.

Paragraph 26 of the document states:

> "It will be open to local planning authorities to seek a certificate of conformity with the Framework."

That optional approach appears to imply that the Government will offer to test the draft and adopted local development frameworks to see whether they conform with the NPPF. That raises a whole new series of questions about how an LDF based on a revoked regional strategy or on the existing PPS1 could ever meet a test of conformity with the new NPPF, especially in relation to the presumption in favour of sustainable development. When the final version of the proposals comes out, will the Minister clarify how that will work effectively? We need to be clear about the transitional arrangements because the lack of a transition plan would be an open invitation to anyone with land to put in an application to develop on it. What does the Minister think about implementing a two-year process, so that local authorities can get up to speed with their local strategic plans before the provisions come into effect?

If we get this right, we will end up with much simpler planning guidance that will significantly increase the local neighbourhood role in planning and support a genuinely more sustainable approach to development, while still delivering the homes to support the economic development that we all need.

4.18 pm

George Hollingbery (Meon Valley) (Con): I apologise in advance if, having had to truncate my remarks, they sound a little staccato and disjointed. I also draw attention to my declaration of interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to make a few short points to Ministers and other Members. I sat on the Select Committee and heard a lot of evidence from developers and from all sorts of interested parties in planning. We face a situation in which sustainable development is being somewhat perverted by the document before us. Paragraphs 13 and 54, among many others, clearly shorten one of the three legs of sustainability—namely, that of economic growth. The table is clearly tipping in that direction, and we need to shove some pieces of paper under that leg to even it up and make it the same length as the other two. If we are to have truly sustainable development, it must take equal account of all three legs of sustainability.

Unlike many Members, I do not think that we need to do a great deal more on the definition of sustainable development. As long as local authorities are allowed to take equal note of all three corners, we will be in a good place. However, little evidence was presented to the Select Committee that planning has ever really stood in the way of economic development. That is another good reason to re-examine those provisions in the NPPF. It is equally true to say that, while planning might not have impeded economic development, it has not encouraged it much either. There is not much evidence on either side of that argument. There is certainly evidence that it is process, rather than policy, in the planning system that has caused delay, and we need to look as carefully at how we manage the planning process as at the policy that drives it.

[George Hollingbery]

Moving on quickly to definitions, we have two different problems at two different levels. At the general level of definition—I mention the comments of the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) about "significantly and demonstrably"—there are any number of wide-meaning phrases in the NPPF that could do with some substantial testing. Perhaps we should employ some aggressive planning lawyers; there may be one or two in here who would like the work. *[Interruption.]* There is none present at the moment. We need to be absolutely confident that there can be a generally accepted definition of these terms; otherwise we will end up in severe trouble and face many delays over the next few years.

We have also heard a lot of evidence to show that we need to define more clearly things that are important to local authorities. Let me quote Winchester city council here:

> "The brevity of the draft NPPF is refreshing but there are many matters that have been removed in their entirety. For example, guidance which explains how noise issues, specialised rural housing, enforcement, and historical assets and landscapes…should be dealt with".

This issue is going to come back again and again. I have a short suggestion for Ministers. I have not thought this through terribly carefully but there are a lot of existing policies on these issues. Could we make these available to local authorities to adopt in whole or in part, or could they be modified in a way we find acceptable and then be made available for adoption if authorities thought they were sensible, particularly at a time of strained assets and strained capabilities in local government?

I have another little idea—re-inspection of local plans. It seems to me that a lot of the tension we have at the moment happens because plans can go out of date. The NPPF says very particularly that where a plan is out of date and demonstrably so, the presumption is in favour of development. Why can we not have a light-touch re-inspection on a regular basis? Each local authority is currently mandated to produce an annual report, so why could it not entail a very short re-adoption of the local plan with minimal consultation to see if the major tenets of the plan have changed? If we did that, we would not only have robustness against challenge from developers, but we might even be able to lose the 20% over-allocation, because that would have been regularly monitored throughout the period of the plan. That might satisfy many different constituencies.

On the interregnum, I believe, as others have said, that two years is a good number in which to adopt a new plan, which will then come into force. It is essential, however, that that is an absolute limit. One of the great attractions of the NPPF is that it forces local authorities to put plans in place. There must not be any budging on that. We are left, are we not, with two alternatives? Do we allow the current local plan derived from the regional spatial strategy to continue for two years, or do we give increasing weight to the emerging new local plan? I favour the latter course, but we need to make a decision on that front.

There are many other important issues—the balance of process, brownfield sites, "city centre first", the balance of spatial planning, the "larger than local" planning—but far too little time to cover them. The broad thrust of the changes is right. If we put power back in the hands of local people and make the plan robust to challenge, we will all be in a much better place.

4.22 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Following the spirit of what the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, I mention the fact that my family are members of the National Trust. I was a member until I came to this place and now have no time to visit its beautiful houses and locations—but perhaps I will again one day.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this afternoon's debate. During the conference recess, I attended a number of meetings on this subject in my constituency and I would like to pay tribute to the Garendon Park Countryside Protection group, the Barrow residents action group and the Loughborough south-west action group, all of which took the time to brief me on their thoughts and concerns about what is being proposed.

As we have heard, planning is a popular issue for constituents to write about. I estimate that about 100 people contacted me through individual letters, which were often signed by many more people, and those letters were about the framework, the Localism Bill or specific planning applications within the last few months. I am not at all surprised to hear the Minister say that there have been 10,000 responses to the consultation on the framework. I wish him well in reading them all—or, at least, a proportion of them.

We have heard the current planning system mentioned this afternoon. I have to say that I do not think the current system has anything to recommend it. I have not been a local councillor, but I am married to one and I have watched him grapple with the system as it affects councils in my constituency. I think the current planning rules are inaccessible for local residents; I think 1,000 pages is far too long. I believe the current system is basically a lawyers charter—and I speak as a former lawyer. Communities feel shut out of the process: there are limited grounds for objection—I cannot think how many times we have had to ensure that there are highways grounds or other reasons for objecting—and those wishing to develop land have no obligation to consult. I consider that a mistake but it is something that the framework will put right.

The hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who, unfortunately, is no longer in her place, was right about the planning process: planning applications take too long and appeals are too costly. That is why we need a proper plan-led system, which the framework will deliver. I have already told the Minister privately that, although much of the discussion has been about house building, we have forgotten the needs of business. Small businesses in my constituency often need places to expand, but, as I said in an intervention, people often have to go around the houses several times before getting their applications approved. I would like to think that that would not be the case if we could get the system working as we want it to work.

As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, we all know of people who cannot get on to the housing ladder, whether for affordable housing, family housing or older people's accommodation. There is definitely a need for more housing, but it has to be where people want it to be in their local communities. We have also heard how the planning system is in limbo and leaves councils vulnerable to speculative applications. I have taken that point from a recent paper presented to the Charnwood borough council cabinet by the planning officers. We cannot allow this limbo to continue for too much longer.

I am broadly supportive of the aims of the framework, but I would like clarification on some key areas. We have talked about the presumption in favour of sustainable development. At the risk of ousting the DCLG officials, who, I am sure, have given this much more thought than I have, I would argue that sustainable development might be better achieved through the general principle of building long-term successful communities that support economic growth, environmental protection and general well-being—to use that rather woolly phrase mentioned earlier. There also needs to be further clarification of the relationship between local authorities and neighbourhood plans.

I endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr Brine). If we believe in localism, which I think Government Members do, we have to go for it; we cannot have half-baked localism. I am unhappy, therefore, about the idea of a five-year supply of housing land plus the 20% allowance, which seems to contradict the Government's aim of abolishing top-down housing targets. I also endorse what has been said about the use of existing housing stock. Loughborough has a number of houses that used to be occupied by students but which are now sitting empty. I would like the council, supported by the Government, to find innovative ways of bringing those houses back into family use.

We have talked about markets, and I entirely endorse what the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) said about their importance in town centres. We have already talked about transition arrangements. It has become clear to me that there is other guidance that might not fall within the planning system—I am talking particularly about highways. I discovered this week something called, "Manual for Streets 2", which talks about traffic junctions, which appear to be driving the need for the council to give the go-ahead for a development in Barrow upon Soar. That cannot be right.

I thank the Government for providing the time for this debate. I cannot remember the last time that we debated something while it was still in consultation.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Because people have shown restraint, for which I am extremely grateful, I can increase the time limit back to six minutes. We should get everybody in.

4.28 pm

Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I hope that I do not take my six minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Like many other hon. Members, I have served as a local councillor and grappled with the complicated planning system over a number of years. I would like to thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for the fantastic effort that he has put into the Localism Bill. The planning proposals represent a serious move towards achieving the localism agenda, and I know that my constituents will benefit hugely from them. They will make the planning system clearer, more democratic, more effective and give real power to local people to determine planning permission themselves or at least to have their views taken into account.

That is necessary. The economic climate means that local councils across the country do not have the money to spend on lengthy, costly planning appeals, as has been mentioned. The national planning policy framework provides guidance for local councils on drawing up local development plans and empowers local communities to come together, through local parish councils or neighbourhood forums, to draw up neighbourhood plans for the local areas that they know best. The neighbourhood plans will be included in the local development framework, and I understand that it is those documents that will be used to determine planning applications, giving people a real say in what happens to their local areas.

Proposals for local green space designation and the identification of suitable areas for renewable and low-carbon energy are extremely welcome. We must bear in mind that protections conferred by earlier legislation will still apply to, for instance, areas of outstanding natural beauty, but I am keen for councils to back them up with good neighbourhood plans. I know from my experience as a councillor, and from talking to my constituents, that it is local people who show real passion and enthusiasm for their own areas, and it is right that their voices should be heard.

There is just one point that I should like clarified. Will some sort of contingency plan be provided when a council does not have a live local plan to protect it from unwanted development?

4.31 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. While I endorse the vast bulk of the Government's proposals, because I have only six minutes I shall focus on the one tiny aspect of the framework that causes me slight concern. I refer to the chapter on the historic environment.

I have two non-pecuniary interests to declare. First, for reasons that I do not yet understand, I am still a member of the National Trust—an organisation which, it must be said, has not risen in my estimation in recent weeks. Perhaps more important is the fact that I am also a member of the Twentieth Century Society, which campaigns for the protection of buildings constructed during the last century. When the society first comes into contact with many heritage assets, they are not designated as listed assets, so it finds it very difficult to persuade Governments to take them seriously. What worries the society, and many amenity societies, is that the "Historic environment" chapter concerns only designated heritage assets, and does not refer to other aspects of heritage that may be brought into play.

I fear that, given the emphasis on localism, neighbourhood planning and local groups at the grass roots, on the bringing together of local plans and on putting what local people want first, many types of architectural heritage that ought to be valued but, for one reason or another, may not be will not be given the full consideration that they deserve. That may strike many Members as a subtle discrepancy, but I think it is an important one. Let me give an example.

[Paul Maynard]

Each year, the World Monuments Fund—many Members may not know of its existence, but I assure them that it does exist—issues a "watch" that lists sites around the world that are of historical importance and under great threat. This month's watch has adopted "British brutalism" as a genre. I assure Members that that refers not to the Chamber but to three sites in the United Kingdom: the South Bank, which the Government sadly failed to list despite English Heritage's recommendation; Birmingham central library, which, as I am sure the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) is aware, is the subject of a long-running saga; and Preston bus station, the subject of an equally long-running soap opera. The position of all three has been highly controversial. None of them is officially listed, which greatly concerns the amenity societies. If they are not listed, how can they be catered for?

The most recent edition of *The Architects' Journal* describes brutalism as "fashionably unfashionable", which is, perhaps, how many of us regard what we consider to be concrete eyesores in our constituencies. It is a great concern that buildings that might not immediately be aesthetically pleasing to us now but that might at some point in the future be deemed to have great historical and heritage value will not get the protection they deserve under this framework. Although I welcome the ambition of shrinking the framework document from 1,000 pages to 100 pages, brevity should be not just the soul of wit, but the soul of clarity. We must ensure that certain current statutory protections remain in place, and I seek reassurance on that. Given the degree of local autonomy that is proposed, there is great concern that such buildings will not be protected.

That reassurance can be given in a number of ways. The Minister could tweak the framework or add warm words, or reconsider the role he envisages for statutory bodies such as English Heritage and existing amenity societies that cover the 20th century, the Victorian and Georgian eras and periods further back in history. He might also reconsider the role he envisages the Department for Culture, Media and Sport playing in respect of neighbourhood plans.

How can we ensure that when our local village considers its neighbourhood plan and makes decisions about a building that some might call a concrete monstrosity but others might call a beautiful example of a postmodernist bungalow, it takes into account not only its own aesthetic impressions, but the heritage value of what it has in its community? What steps can we take to ensure that the legitimate concerns of the amenity societies are respected? As we are engaged in a consultation process, I do not expect an answer now, but I hope that some reassurance on this point might be forthcoming in the very near future.

4.36 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I broadly support the intentions of this new framework. For far too long, the planning process has been riddled with uncertainty and ambiguity, leading to widespread misunderstanding and frustration. In particular, I welcome the simplification of the guidance from a bewildering 1,000-plus pages to a manageable 52 pages. I also welcome the removal of top-down pressure by the abolition of the unpopular regional spatial strategies. That has resulted in a reduction of 20% on the previous Government's insistence that 12,400 houses should be built in south Wiltshire, where my constituency lies.

I also welcome the framework's safeguards for the green belt, areas of outstanding national beauty and sites of special scientific interest, as well as the acknowledgement of the need to protect wildlife, biodiversity and our cultural heritage. However, I have considerable concern about how the principle of localism will work in reality. Frankly, the devil is in the detail, and the precise mechanisms for collating, calibrating and putting together local views to create a local core strategy need to be clarified.

In Salisbury, there was a decision on Hampton Park II four weeks ago. The Secretary of State overturned the decision by a local planning inspector, thereby approving the building of 525 homes, which has fundamentally undermined confidence in the planning process. That may be due in part to the previous Government's determination to abolish the district council in Salisbury by amalgamating other district councils to form a Wiltshire unitary authority. The price of this change has been the perception of a considerable distancing in decision making, and that is particularly keenly felt in planning.

I wish to pay tribute to Councillors Moss and McLennan, who have done so much to champion the concerns of the Laverstock and Ford parish. Councillor McLennan expressed his views to me. He said that

> "from a local perspective, the core strategy was a poisoned chalice. The forward-planners of Salisbury district, who morphed and increased under Wiltshire council to become 'spatial planners' had our strategic gap in the frame…However, we were negotiating until the remote spatial folk from Trowbridge overruled the locals."

He recognises that other parishes will be able to determine the nature of the housing that should be built, but in this transitional period the consequences of unclear guidance have been devastating.

Specific concerns about the need to include a strategic gap—a piece of land that acts as a barrier between new planned development and the separate parish—have not been recognised. In fact, Ron Champion, chairman of Laverstock and Ford parish council has told me that

> "the views of this parish have been wholly ignored in regards to the numbers appropriate for the development known as Hampton Park II and Wiltshire council got itself into a position of opposing a development of 500 homes on the site in front of one inspector—whilst supporting the 500 homes in front of another."

The inadequacy of the consultation process on the development of the core strategy to replace the RSS has left a bitter taste. In essence, there is much confusion over the definition of the word "local". When parishes are motivated to make, and indeed do make, a constructive, considered and meaningful contribution to a core strategy only to find that three weeks before it is formally adopted the Secretary of State overturns an individual planning decision by a local inspector on the basis that the core strategy is still awaited and so only limited weight to its provisions can be given, that means my local constituents' views have, in effect, been set aside. That is how they see it.

My constituents are angry. They believe that the Secretary of State could have delayed this decision by a few weeks to await the protection that the core strategy could have provided, because it is in the detail of those provisions that good individual planning applications and decisions are enabled. My local parishioners were not saying, "No housing here." They made a serious attempt to define the design qualities required to fit in with the local community's wishes, but they now have a scheme, approved by a Minister, that is sub-optimally designed and does not fit with what is in the core strategy.

I ask the ministerial team to review the guidance and procedures adopted by the Department in handling appeals, so that when core strategies are not quite adopted some serious attempt is made to acknowledge what is in them and they can have a bearing on decisions made. I do not want any more of my constituents to say to me, "What does 'localism' mean? We did what was expected. The core strategy gave guidelines that contradict the logic of the Secretary of State's decision and, had he known about it, it would have had some meaning." The new framework must not simply be a codification of sensible rules for the future; it must also deal with the practical contradictions and realities of the present, and with the pipeline of unadopted core strategies that appear to give opportunistic home builders a smooth ride to build sub-optimal developments.

4.42 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I begin by stating that before I came to this place last May I was a chartered surveyor for 27 years, during which time I saw the planning process get slower and more bureaucratic, with an increasing complexity of planning regulations. There is a need for a faster and more flexible process that brings the plethora of guidance notes down to a manageable size. The publication of the draft NPPF is very much a move in the right direction, although some amendments and rewording may well be necessary.

Many have argued that by introducing the principle in favour of sustainable development the Government are undermining the whole planning process. That is not the case, as the presumption in favour of development was first enshrined in the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. What the draft NPPF seeks to do is reiterate and reinforce that, and it introduces the 21st- century principle of sustainability.

There has been much debate as to whether sustainability should be defined and embedded in the Localism Bill, whether a fuller definition than the Brundtland one should be provided and whether the 2005 definition should be used. My own view, which is supported by the Local Government Association, is that a more detailed definition should be left to local planning authorities; it should be for them to decide on the definition that best suits them, taking into account local circumstances and concerns.

That may include consideration of whether adequate infrastructure can be provided to underpin a particular development so as to ensure that the development is properly sustainable.

I was going to say a bit about the housing crisis, but it has been said. I will say, however, that planning is not the principal cause of the housing crisis, but a streamlined and less bureaucratic process has a vital role to play in overcoming it.

Much concern has been expressed that the NPPF is a developers' charter and that it will open up the countryside for development. I do not believe that that is the case, as the framework preserves the green belt and areas of outstanding natural beauty and introduces a new designation of local green spaces as an additional tier of protection for valuable open space that local planning authorities can incorporate in their local plans. Moreover, the natural environment White Paper has an important role to play in delivering wider protection for the environment.

I am also conscious of the future of our town centres and the need to reinvigorate them. The "town centre first" policy that has been pursued since 1996 has an important role to play in achieving that, and although it is referred to in the framework, I ask the Minister of State to consider ways in which this part of the framework might be strengthened.

The Minister is to be commended for providing a strong focus on design. Towns and villages across Britain reflect a wide variety of local designs and architecture built up over many centuries, and that very much defines Britain and the built environment that we all cherish. We have lost that in recent decades. The sense of place has been replaced by a sense of "sameness", with the same developments by the same developers across the country, with little regard to local traditions, styles and identities. We need to move away from that, and the incorporation of design in the framework provides the opportunity to do so.

Over the years, while I was practising, I came across many schemes that had obtained planning permission that would never be built because they were financially non-viable. I therefore welcome the conclusions on viability in the framework. However, it is important that if a scheme is non-viable in the first instance, the planners and developers consider redesigning or reshaping the scheme rather than straight away permitting a development that might be described as inadequate.

The Minister is introducing radical proposals for how planning works in this country and it is my view that they are for the better. What he is proposing is in fact a double devolution, not only empowering local authorities but also local neighbourhoods. It is important that transitional arrangements are put in place to ensure a smooth move to the new system.

The framework puts local people in the driving seat. Councils and local communities will be able to control what happens in their local areas as long as they have an up-to-date local plan in place. The framework will ensure that heritage is protected and local authorities will be able to decide where development should take place and which areas should be protected.

The Government are right to approach this matter with a sense of urgency, to have brought forward the framework in this form and to have this debate so that they can take full account of hon. Members' opinions as well as the views of the many bodies that have made representations. There might well be a need for some revision, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister's door is open and that he will listen to well-reasoned proposals. In places, the wording of the framework might need to be tightened and there might be a need to expand the document to, say, 80 or 90 pages, but this streamlined process is vital to ensure that the planning process works properly and efficiently and takes full account of local people's concerns.

Many people have expressed the view that the framework is too development and growth-oriented. There is a need for growth, but it is a need for "good" growth that

[Peter Aldous]

also ensures that environmental and social interests are not prejudiced. I believe the framework gives us the basis for achieving that.

4.48 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am delighted to have the chance to speak in this debate and, in particular, to congratulate those on the Front Bench on their localism agenda, which is so important to this country and not least to Northamptonshire, the county I am proud to represent. Under the Labour Government, Northamptonshire's regional spatial strategy forced development on to greenfield sites, with the unwelcome intrusion of large developments on the edges of villages, which members of the local community have been unable to resist. I certainly recognise the need for more housing, but the worst part of that approach has been the inability to keep Northamptonshire's infrastructure in line with the growing population.

According to the Office for National Statistics, Northamptonshire was the second-fastest-growing county between 2004 and 2009. It was very much an area for growth, but the policing and health care settlements and the local government grant have lagged far behind the demographic growth. When I was out canvassing for the general election in 2010 people told me, for example, that they were eight months pregnant and still did not have a proper midwife because there simply were not enough midwives. Northampton general hospital is often on red alert because its services are so pressed. We really do have a backlog of infrastructure needs, so I thoroughly welcome, first, the desire to achieve more localism and, secondly, the desire for sustainable development, which means bringing alongside the infrastructure that is necessary.

I should like to make a few points about the concerns for my constituency specifically as a result of the mad rush for growth of the past 10 years. Northamptonshire is suffering from a grey area, because the regional spatial strategy has not yet gone and we do not have a coherent local development plan. My constituency has 92 parishes, and the prospect of trying to write 92 neighbourhood development plans within six months is a very tall order. We will need a period during which there can be no prospect of some developer free-for-all. It is no exaggeration to say that almost every green site in South Northamptonshire has some developer option on it. That is of real concern to my constituents.

The last thing we want is any pause in the Government introducing legislation that will give clarity to my constituents. Equally, however, we do not want something else that is happening now, I am afraid, where planners, particularly at appeal, are taking into account the NPPF while it is still under consultation. I very much regret that. In a recent appeal regarding a wind farm development, the inspector took into account these measures, which are still under consultation, in his considerations. We do not have a result yet, but I very much hope that a misinterpretation of the term "sustainable development" does not lead to a wind farm that should have been subject to other considerations.

Specifically on wind farms, I congratulate our Front-Bench team on inserting a material planning consideration regarding how windy an area is. It has always seemed to me complete madness that that did not matter, but it is very important in Northamptonshire because we are not a terribly windy county. You might think that we produce plenty of wind here in the Chamber, Mr Deputy Speaker, between the seven of us, but we are not a very good site for wind farms, so I am very glad to see that measure. Nevertheless, we really need to reinforce local communities' ability to take the right decisions for their area.

There are three issues on which I urge the Government to focus for the sake of Northamptonshire and, indeed, the whole country. First, I would like them to focus on the definition of sustainable development to ensure that planners have to take into account not only current needs but any backlog of infrastructure requirements that have resulted from disastrous Labour policies. Secondly, we need to ensure that we have clarity between now and when our local development plans are in place and signed off. Thirdly, we need to defend our greenfield sites against development when plenty of brownfield sites remain. I urge the Front-Bench team to bear those issues closely in mind.

Let me finish by making two suggestions—I am not sure whether they have been discussed during the debate. A big problem that I have come across in South Northamptonshire is the time developers have for planning permission, and I wonder whether we could constrain that. First, there are an awful lot of permission sites that developers are sitting on, presumably waiting for the market to turn round. Secondly, there is the issue of developers building a few footings and then leaving a development for ages and ages. If we could constrain those practices, that would help considerably in building the homes that we certainly need.

4.54 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): I draw everyone's attention to my interests as listed in the register.

I am committed to protecting the environment in my constituency. I am committed to ensuring that we have more houses. I think that those two things are quite compatible—they certainly are if we have strong local plans underpinned by proper consultation and the involvement of local people. The Minister was absolutely right when he opened his remarks with the observation that people are worried about having planning done to them rather than being involved in planning. I have noticed that most of the criticisms of the national planning policy framework are along the lines of, "This is going to be terrible for us. Something is going to happen." We have to disabuse people of that fear. I have been doing that to some extent in the constituency already, and this debate has been a useful opportunity to continue that process.

I have listened to Stroud district council, which is very pleased to find that it will have fewer national guidance documents and more simplified ways of proceeding. It welcomes the idea of having a local plan that will be effectively informed by local opinion. I have also talked to the Gloucestershire Campaign to Protect Rural England. CPRE has been involved nationally, but locally it recognises the importance of a sovereign local plan and wants one in place. We must make sure that it is. The CPRE is also very keen on the idea of the duty to co-operate, as specified in the Localism Bill. That is a really important step, and one that we need to consider.

As far as planning principles go, it is critical to realise that a proper understanding of sustainability is often found at the local level. That is certainly the case in my constituency. That is because factors such as flooding must be included, and local people know about such things. They will be able to put into a local plan a realistic appraisal of the impact of such factors in terms of sustainability. It is right that we make sure that the local plan includes a proper definition of sustainability, and that that has some force and power.

I turn now to the National Trust. It is national; it is not a local structure in the sense of having accountability. Having read the National Trust Act 1971, I cannot find evidence of any accountability at all. However, I agree with some of the points that the trust made to the Environmental Audit Committee, such as those about the definition of sustainability. I tested the Minister on those issues and on issues of local planning, and I am satisfied that the Government have properly thought about the need to link the national planning policy framework with local plans.

There are five things that we really must get right. The first is the transition. There is a lot of concern about the situation that we now find ourselves in, where the NPPF is starting to be referred to as material evidence, and about what might transpire in a planning situation, so we need more clarity about the transition, and also more speed. The second area is the power of local plans. We must be sure that they are the things that matter, and we need to make more noise about that. Certainly we need to talk about the role of the inspectors. In Stroud, the inspectors overturned a decision of the district council, allowing a building development to take place—Foxes Field—which has turned out to be the source of huge trouble. If people had listened more carefully to the local opinion, that would have been avoided.

The third area is the capacity of local planners. We have great local planners in Stroud district council, but we need to make sure that all our councils are properly equipped with the right capacity to make sure that they have a local plan in place, and that that local plan is informed by evidence and reflects local opinion. The fourth area I would like to talk about, which I referred to earlier, is co-operation between councils. Stroud district council is up against Gloucester, and of course there are issues about where developments take place, so councils need to learn to co-operate. The Government should put more emphasis on that and they should do something if there is no co-operation.

Finally, we need to protect areas of outstanding natural beauty—Harold Wilson's one great achievement—national parks and so on. I am committed to protecting my area, as we have some fantastic places along the Slad valley, and so far we have fought successfully to stop a development on Wades farm. We intend to fight to stop a development on Sellars farm near Hardwicke. We are fighting, first, to protect the AONB and, secondly, to protect the integrity of a village. That is the sort of thing that local people want to do, and they will be able to do it more easily if we have strong and robust local plans.

5 pm

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): In the spirit of the debate, may I refer hon. Members to the register and declare my membership of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, the Gloucestershire wildlife trust, Friends of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common, and the Leckhampton Green Land Action Group? May I pay tribute, too, to the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who has responded constructively and openly to this debate, and to the wider debate? He has certainly spent a lot of time with me and with other Back Benchers who have expressed concern about the national planning policy framework, which is very much appreciated.

I share the emerging consensus across the House that the general principles of the framework may be good, and that the idea of simplification is welcome—certainly to anyone who has tried to trawl through volumes of planning guidance. There are, however, serious concerns about the way in which the first draft has come out. I agree, in particular, with many of the comments about the six-year supply rule and the large loophole regarding the ability of developers and others to challenge not just local plans but individual policies and evidence on the basis that they are out of date, absent, silent or indeterminate. Points have been well made on those, and I will not repeat them.

This should have been a trouble-free area of coalition policy. The precedents were very good, and I was shocked at how good the Conservative policy on planning was in "Open Source Planning" when it was published. It was very, very impressive; we were rather startled and felt the need to catch up. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) has obviously been involved in developing even more robust policies. There was an emphatic statement in "Open Source Planning" which I thought was very good:

> "Our emphasis on local control will allow local planning authorities to determine exactly how much development they want, of what kind and where."

It balanced that with incentives, so there was not a temptation to say no to everything, but that emphatic statement was rather good, and if it can be repeated in the framework, that will be helpful.

Some Liberal Democrat policies on the natural environment, including the one that I helped to co-author on natural heritage, which was adopted by the party, made some complementary statements on the protection of the natural environment. We said:

> "Too often we have parcelled off a small number of sites or areas for special protection by experts and left the rest to the mercy of market forces where different values often prevail and valuable natural resources are lost."

That document originated the policy of local green spaces, which is in the framework, and which I very much welcome. It is designed to help to protect green spaces, not for their biodiversity or outstanding beauty, but simply because they are important to local people and have been proven to be so.

Those themes have been reinforced in government, in the Localism Bill, in the natural environment White Paper, with its very strong emphasis on the valuing of natural capital, and, indeed, in the statement last November by the Prime Minister, who said that

> "we will start measuring our progress as a country not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving, not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life."

That is important.

[Martin Horwood]

There are tensions in this debate, and it is important to consider the need for housing, including the very real need for affordable housing, and the need to tackle the affordability crisis, but it is a mistake to think that growth will be a panacea for those problems, for a number of reasons. First, as a country we need to learn to live within our environmental limits. Green space is a finite resource, and certainly on a crowded island with limited suitable areas for recreation and enjoyment, as well as for building, we cannot simply build and build and grow and grow. That is fundamentally unsustainable in the end.

Secondly, there are about 1 million more homes in this country than there are households, according to answers given to me by the Minister's own Department. The problem, of course, is that they are not in the right places for jobs and work and where people want to live. It is local patterns of supply and demand that are the really big factors. In some areas, such as my constituency and others that have been mentioned, the demand is simply insatiable. Cheltenham has grown by 60% over recent decades, but we still have relatively high house prices and a housing waiting list. We can build on enormous amounts of countryside and those things will still apply because we will still have—I hope—really good jobs, good schools and a good built and natural environment. It is those kinds of things that drive this.

It comes as a bit of a shock, therefore, to find ourselves accused of producing a developer's charter. The reason for that, I think, is in the wording of this document and the imbalance in it. There are very definite statements that

> "local planning authorities should plan positively for new development"

and that planning

> "must operate to encourage growth",

The statements on the environment, however, are much more measured and often qualified. Even the one that states:

> "Plans should allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value"

is immediately qualified:

> "where practical, having regard to other policies in the Framework including the presumption in favour of sustainable development. Plans should be prepared on the basis that objectively assessed development needs should be met".

Even where we are trying to use language that is more environmentally friendly and values social and environmental factors, it is heavily qualified. That needs to be rebalanced, because this language matters. It is listened to by local planners and the officers who drive local policies.

5.6 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I begin by saying that I was delighted to have the opportunity on Tuesday to hold a debate in Westminster Hall and thank everyone who contributed to it? I do not intend to repeat the many points I raised, but I remind those who want to read the report of the debate of any interest I declared in my various comments about the green belt. The green belt is a passion for me because of the situation in my constituency, which has no greenfield land, only green belt and brownfield sites.

I agree with so much of what has been said by all hon. Friends on the coalition Benches, especially the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood), that I think we are in danger of breaking out into a bit of a love-in. I thought he was about to escape, but it seems he feels compelled to stay. I want to thank the Secretary of State and his Ministers for the various reassurances they have given and public pronouncements they have made, particularly about the green belt, which I wish had been more widely publicised. Of course, it has never been said of the Secretary of State that he is not one for coming forward, as he has come forward on many occasions and spoken in his normal, robust manner. Unfortunately, I do not think that enough people heard him when he gave the reassurance that the framework contains not only a continuation of the existing policy to protect our green belt, but a very good argument that the coalition Government are determined to ensure that it is even better protected. I thank him for that.

I would like to raise two points. The first—I am being completely parochial about my constituency—relates to open-cast mining. We touched on this very briefly in the debate in Westminster Hall. I know that the framework refers to mineral extraction and really hope that the Government will listen to Members with constituencies in which there is a threat of open-cast mining. In my constituency, open-cast mining would be on green-belt land between Cossall and Trowell. It is very precious and beautiful land. It is historic and has connections to D.H. Lawrence. I submit that it is a complete contradiction to say that we could ever have open-cast mining on green-belt land. The two simply do not go together. If the Government cannot go as far as to agree with me on that, I urge them to look at the very good idea, put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), for a buffer zone between residential property and any open-cast mining.

I was slightly cynical about the framework when I first examined it, but over time I have found within it many things not only that should satisfy everybody's concerns, but that we should welcome and trumpet. I am particularly impressed by the neighbourhood plan, and this is where I refer to the Liberal Democrats, because unfortunately Broxtowe's small group of remaining Liberal Democrat councillors have, in their wisdom, chosen to remain in coalition with Labour, and they control Broxtowe borough council. As part of their policy, they have accepted the plan for some 6,000 new houses in my constituency, but there is enough room for only 2,000 on the brownfield site, and the rest will have to be built on the green belt.

I am opposed to that decision, and I believe that the majority of people in my constituency are, too, but the Liberal Democrat who represents the village of Trowell makes a very good point when he says, "I'm being realistic, and, when we look at previous decisions in Broxtowe and a particular stretch of land, we will have difficulty persuading anybody that there should not be a large number of houses built on this particular stretch of green belt known as Field farm."

That individual makes those representations to me in private and in public, and to be completely blunt he may well have a very good point, but where I criticise him and other members of the ruling group on my local council is over their complete disregard for the ethos that runs through the framework, which is about working with communities—where communities decide things based on neighbourhood plans. That is a wonderful idea, and Rushcliffe borough council, which happens to be Conservative-controlled, is going out and holding workshops.

Martin Horwood: At the risk of continuing the love-in, may I say that I have some sympathy, because three Gloucestershire councils have just published a joint core strategy, which will be completely unsupported by local people, for 40,000 new houses in Gloucestershire—though I hate to say that most of the councils involved are Conservative-led.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful, believe it or not, for that intervention, because the hon. Gentleman makes a serious point, and I feel a lot of sympathy for councillors who are advised by their officers—understandably—but sometimes almost put in fear. They feel that they have to take a particular route, but they forget that they are the democratically elected representatives of their communities. That may be a criticism of ourselves on these Benches—that we have not explained the great provisions in the Localism Bill, which will empower our neighbourhoods to come together and to decide on their own plans.

I am, however, becoming confident that the Liberal Democrats in Broxtowe will hear that message loud and clear, especially when the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell) responds to the debate. They will realise that the Bill gives them the power to work with those people, coming together to build sustainable communities that are not just the sort of awful housing development that we have seen in so many parts of the country, which were built using the previous Government's atrocious Prescott regulations with no regard at all for services and no proper consideration of infrastructure, but in fact sustainable developments—not just providing good homes for people, but improving their services, improving infrastructure and, indeed, embracing the environment. Such developments are not about simply concreting over land.

As ever, the clock is against me, but that is probably good for Opposition Members, as I was about to turn my attention to the previous Government's disgraceful policy. I find it quite astonishing that Opposition Front Benchers, given their dreadful policies that would have concreted over thousands of acres of our green belt, can criticise Government Members and, notably, Front Benchers, so I commend this framework and look forward to the transition powers and all that they will bring.

5.14 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I think it was Lord Palmerston who is supposed to have said that only three people had ever really understood the Schleswig-Holstein question: Prince Albert, who was dead; a German professor, who had gone mad; and Palmerston himself, who had long since forgotten it. The same might be said for what passes for the current planning framework. At well over 1,000 pages, it is far too long and, divided between more than 20 planning policy statements that do not always seem to be consistent with each other, it is much too complicated. The complexity and bureaucracy of the planning system has created what I would call a tyranny of experts, where ordinary people are effectively excluded from the process and democratic scrutiny is virtually impossible. If we are to achieve sustainable development that benefits both the economy and the local environment, we need to make sure, as other hon. Members have said, that the right development is built in the right place. That will happen only if development policy is decided at a local level.

The regional strategies, with their top-down targets, were bureaucratic and, frankly, undemocratic. Regional housing targets failed to build the homes that were needed where they were needed. In Dudley, part of which I represent, the local authority projected that an additional 14,000 homes would be needed, but the regional target dictated that 16,000 should be built to satisfy demand in other parts of the region. Residents were understandably opposed to building far more homes than it seemed would be required to cope with population growth and changing household patterns. This has made communities feel isolated from the process and view development in general with suspicion. At the same time, the areas that needed the additional homes to satisfy growing demand, and in some cases housing shortages, would not get the new homes that their communities needed. It is right that there will be a duty for local authorities to work together on planning matters where there is a shared interest. I know from my own constituency how well Dudley and Sandwell councils work together, despite differences in political control, in sharing facilities and services with each other and with other neighbouring authorities.

We need to re-engage our local communities with the planning process so that they can properly shape local development plans, and we need local planning policy to be set by councils, not by regional quangos. Making sure that neighbourhood planning is more than the formality that local consultation has sometimes seemed to be within the planning system is vital if we are to ensure that development reflects communities' concerns and priorities. Local communities need to have a proper voice in deciding where development should take place and which areas should be protected in local plans, but once that is done there must be a meaningful presumption in favour of sustainable development, which is at the heart of the national planning policy framework.

There has been a lot of misinformation, and not all of it coming from shadow Ministers. Some sections of the press give the impression that the presumption would mean that developers could build what they want, where they want, when they want, and how they want. That must not be the case. Presumption of sustainable development gives more power to local communities rather than taking it away. Planning authorities, as other hon. Members have pointed out, will still refuse developments that go against their local plan. Developments that cause significant harm will not be approved. However, putting those local plans into action will be simpler and faster. Housing and regeneration projects that are proposed in local plans should be approved quickly, because we urgently need sustainable development and regeneration to lead the economy forward, especially in areas such as the black country, which I represent.

A number of world-class construction companies are based in the black country, making the sector one of the largest employers in the area. Many of my constituents rely on a strong building industry for their jobs. A quick glance at the list of companies helping to build the

[James Morris]

Olympic facilities, for example, shows that black country construction companies are competing with the best in the country. That has provided a big boost for many companies and has safeguarded countless jobs. We must look at what we can do to remove the barriers that are stopping such firms building the new homes that we need and regenerating our town centres. When we can see for ourselves that the number of homes being built, even before the recession, was well below what was needed, and when we can hear for ourselves companies from all sections of the construction industry saying that the planning system is part of the problem, we need to take action to give the economy the boost it needs.

The four black country local authorities—Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton—have worked hard together to make development across the black country more business friendly. They believe that their joint strategy will pave the way for 60,000 new homes and up to 250,000 square metres of retail development across the black country.

Mr Marcus Jones: Earlier in his contribution, my hon. Friend mentioned neighbourhood planning. Does he agree that neighbourhood planning is extremely important for local communities? Is it not disappointing that local authorities such as Labour-controlled Nuneaton and Bedworth borough council have not been willing to engage local communities in the front-runners scheme? Does he acknowledge that that stifles the opportunity for local people to have their say in the planning system?

James Morris: My hon. Friend makes a good point and he is standing up for his constituents.

As I was saying, the four authorities in the black country believe that their joint strategy will create up to 95,000 jobs.

We need to ensure that we are doing our part and that the Government are doing their part to make it easier to create the sustainable development that our communities and local economies need, and I believe that the planning reforms in the Localism Bill and the NPPF go a long way towards achieving that.

5.21 pm

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this important debate.

Elmbridge borough, which covers my constituency, is 57% green-belt land. I have therefore been inundated, like many colleagues, with letters and e-mails that seek reassurance and a degree of extra clarity about the draft national planning policy framework.

I endorse the Government's principal aim of streamlining the bureaucracy of the planning process. Much has been made of the bureaucratic impact on developers and the economic cost, but it is worth bearing in mind how the planning system that we inherited from the previous Government also tied up local councils in that expensive bureaucratic process, at considerable cost to the taxpayer.

I also recognise the bigger picture. I am delighted that the Government scrapped the south-east plan, with its top-down targets for Elmbridge, which were bitterly resented locally. Rather than being forced to comply with diktats from a distant and faceless regional quango, Elmbridge borough council has replaced the regional plan with a local plan, after extended local consultation. Elected councillors will be accountable to residents for planning policy. That strengthens local democracy and I welcome it wholeheartedly.

I have a number of points and questions on the detail. My understanding is that once a local plan is in place it will govern the planning process for individual applications and will not subsequently be trumped by the framework. If so, that might be spelled out a bit more clearly in the draft framework. I would also be grateful if Ministers clarified whether the presumption in favour of sustainable development applies only where no local plan is in place. If so, it would be useful to be explicit on that point. If not, the relationship between the two needs further elaboration. I urge the Government to give primacy to local democracy.

I welcome the provisions in the draft framework that explicitly acknowledge that the green belt serves the purpose of preventing the merging of towns and wider urban sprawl. I note from the draft framework that there is a narrow list of exceptions to the general rule in paragraph 144 that it is inappropriate to build on green belt. Are those exceptions subject to the strictures in the local plan or can they override it, and with it the democratic credibility that the Government have so painstakingly built up by abolishing the regional plans?

Beyond the green belt, I welcome the exhortation in paragraph 122 for developers to work closely with communities affected by development. Many communities want a safeguard in case developers do not listen. If there is one criticism, it is that the draft framework is a little light when it comes to explaining how the democratic checks that we have built so carefully into local planning policy formulation will translate into the individual application process. I hope that the revised draft can be beefed up in that regard.

In my view, the developer's right of appeal over the heads of our democratically elected councils should be curtailed and the balance shifted in favour of local communities and their representatives. In particular, I should like to see stronger safeguards—I am relaxed about whether they are in statute or guidance—enabling a major development to be blocked by the local council as a whole, a majority of local ward councillors or a local referendum, which would empower residents directly. That seems particularly germane to the practical operation of the principle of the community's right to buy, which is set out in the draft framework.

The framework must not be viewed in isolation, and I welcome the new homes bonus. For too long, the last Government allowed untrammelled development in certain areas and creamed off the tax revenue from the sale of new properties, with communities seeing far too little of that money coming back to support local infrastructure. The new homes bonus will address that, which is crucial because development without the resources to provide the public services to accompany new residents creates considerable local resentment.

Even with the new homes bonus, however, it must be right that local authorities can take into account the costs that developments bring and the burdens on schools, councils, roads, GPs and other local services, in co-ordination with the providers of those services. If that is what is meant by sustainable development, it

[Mr Philip Hammond]

that we want to ensure that those gains are consolidated. However, it is not for us to dictate to the Afghan people their agenda for the future. It is for us to ensure that there is a climate of security and stability in which they can exercise their constitutional right to determine the future of their country in a way that does not threaten the security of ours.

Mark Lancaster (Milton Keynes North) (Con): With all due respect to the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr MacShane), may I urge my right hon. Friend to stick to the strategy, and leave the tactics to the soldiers on the ground? Much work has been done in increasing the capacity of the Afghan national Government, but given the need for economic development, which has been highlighted, much more work needs to be done in provincial government, where capacity remains poor, if we are to leave Afghanistan in a stable state in the long term. Will the Secretary of State say a few words on how we will address that problem?

Mr Hammond: I am sure that the soldiers would thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will consider it carefully. The Government are very much aware of the need to reinforce governance at local and provincial level. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is focused on ensuring that the UK and the broader international package deals at all levels. I would say to my hon. Friend that the initiative to recruit Afghan local police, which is already bearing fruit in a number of provinces, will continue to help to stabilise the situation at local level.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and wish him well in his new post. A large percentage of the soldiers who have been killed or injured in Afghanistan have been killed or injured as a result of improvised explosive devices. Some progress has been made on the equipment that the soldiers are issued with, but the US army, along with private companies, has developed modern technology to combat the threat of IEDs. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that technology advancement in the US will be exchanged with, and made known to, the UK and allied armies, so that the horror of IEDs can be reduced?

Mr Hammond: We have made considerable progress in providing better equipment to reduce the risk of IEDs to the forces. However, developments are ongoing, particularly in relation to vehicles, and we will keep on top of them.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The last quarterly statement discussed the challenging supply route from Karachi. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on that route, and on measures to improve the supply of Helmand province from the north?

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that the US is exploring other possible routes of supply into Regional Command South West. However, for the moment the UK remains dependent on the supply route through Pakistan. As my hon. Friend says, that is a difficult, vulnerable and expensive route. The route is fragile, but it remains a vital lifeline to our operation in Helmand.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's observations on the importance to nation building of the progress of women and girls. Two weeks ago I met Fawzia Koofi, an MP and presidential candidate in Afghanistan, who expressed great concern about the role of women in the upcoming Bonn conference. What can his Department do to ensure, or at least to encourage, the participation of women in that conference?

Mr Hammond: I am not aware of the exact composition of the Afghan delegation to that conference, but I shall certainly take up the issue and discuss it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development to see whether he needs to intervene to ensure that the interests of women are effectively represented.

Kris Hopkins (Keighley) (Con): May I welcome the Secretary of State to his extremely important position and wish him well? May I also welcome his reassurance in response to the Opposition spokesman's question on equipment? Will he reassure the House that, unlike the previous Government, this Government will never deploy troops with inadequate equipment?

Mr Hammond: I have been saying for many years, long before I came anywhere near having a responsibility at the Dispatch Box for this issue, that it is not moral to ask troops to go into mortal danger without the best equipment that we can provide them for personal protection, and that remains my view.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend both on his appointment and on the remarkable speed with which he is mastering the brief? He mentioned the importance of developing the local police force. One of the key factors for success in Helmand province and elsewhere in southern Afghanistan will be recruiting southern Pashtuns into the Afghan national army, so that it is no longer seen as an army of northern foreigners.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At the moment the ethnic balance in the ANA does not reflect the ethnic mix of the population, as it is heavily Tajik dominated. In the longer run, it will be necessary to achieve a better representation of the ethnic mix of Afghanistan in the forces, but that process will take time and inevitably will be a consequence of the reconciliation and reintegration process that will take place over the coming years.

Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I have spoken in the Chamber before about gaps in the air bridge that can mean that up to three days can be taken off the two-week rest and relaxation period that is obviously incredibly valuable to our personnel. Will my right hon. Friend look at this issue again as we approach transition, and see whether the period can start from when troops arrive back in the UK, rather than when they leave their front-line bases?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I will certainly look at the issue. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces thinks that we have already done that, but I will check and write to her.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the role of Secretary of State. It has been an absolute pleasure to work as part of his team in the Department for Transport, and I am sure that he will make an excellent Secretary of State for Defence. Will he update the House on his plans for an Afghan national army officer training centre?

Mr Hammond: The Prime Minister announced in the summer that the UK would lead the establishment of an Afghan national army officer training centre just outside Kabul. We will provide about 75% of the staff required for the academy and we are in discussion with other nations about supplying the other 25%. The centre will be one of the UK's lasting legacies for the effectiveness of the Afghan national forces in the future.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. I appreciate that he has only been Defence Secretary for a few days, but what is his assessment of unmanned drones, such as Watchkeeper, in terms of combating threats such as IEDs?

Mr Hammond: Clearly the evidence of the campaign in Afghanistan is that unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles make a huge contribution to our intelligence picture, including at the level of interdiction of IEDs. Armed unmanned aerial vehicles have also played an important part in the US campaign to attack high-value targets.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I too welcome the Secretary of State to his post, and having listened to him for some 48 minutes, I would have thought that he had been in post for four years rather than 48 hours. I have spoken to the US general responsible for training the Afghan police and army, and he put a real emphasis—as did his report—on the quality of recruits, not just the quantity. Does my right hon. Friend agree that improving the levels of literacy will be crucial if we are to leave a strong force behind?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I absolutely agree—and good progress has been made on improving rates of literacy in the ANA.

If I may, I will take this opportunity to give the answer that I could not give earlier to the Opposition spokesman. All ANA and ANP recruits are now biometrically enrolled, which will help with the anti-infiltration programme.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): In addition to our military activities, what role, if any, are our troops playing in supporting and providing the vital infrastructure that will be so important in helping Afghans develop their economy and create the stable environment in which to provide for their own security?

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that our development programme is executed via the use of private contractors, but where necessary, of course, we shall use UK forces to protect those contractors, as happened in the case to which I referred earlier involving the highway construction programme.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I welcome the new Secretary of State for Defence to his position and urge him to stay there for as long as he possibly can, because we need to break this cycle of permanently changing Secretaries of State for Defence. I thank him for agreeing to meet 3 Commando Brigade when it returns, but I ask him for two assurances: that Plymouth will remain a principal naval port in the defence of our country and that he will find time in his diary to visit the Haslar unit, which is part of 3 Commando Brigade in my constituency and which helps members of the armed forces who have been badly hurt and who sometimes have had limbs amputated?

Mr Hammond: I am happy to do my best to remain in post for as long as I can, although my hon. Friend might address his plea to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. It is the Government's policy that Plymouth will remain one of the UK's principal naval bases, and I am happy to arrange a visit to the Haslar unit at a convenient time.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): May I, too, add to the bouquets of congratulations under which my right hon. Friend is being buried today? In July, President Karzai of Afghanistan accepted that his Government needed to provide a more predictable environment of security to Afghan citizens. What further can the Afghan Government do with their political and military machinery—my right hon. Friend has spoken about the recruitment of more local policemen—to help build that more predictable security environment before 2014?

Mr Hammond: If my hon. Friend could avoid the term "buried", I would be grateful to him. It is vital that we create this climate of security—I have referred to some of the initiatives under way—but it is clear to me, from everyone I have spoken to over the past 96 hours, that nobody who knows the country believes that there can be a sustainable, durable, peaceful Afghanistan unless all its people are included. That means that reactivating the reconciliation process and the political track at the earliest possible opportunity—after the disruption suffered following the Rabbani assassination—will be of critical importance to the future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment? Although lots of NATO countries are involved in Afghanistan, only we, the United States and a few others are doing more than their fair share. The same seems to be true in other theatres, such as Libya and in the anti-piracy operations off the African coast. Will he do all that he can to ensure that all NATO members play their full part in the success of this organisation?

Mr Hammond: I am happy to take up the cudgels on this issue, which, as my hon. Friend will know, my predecessor regarded as hugely important. I pay tribute to the huge progress and consistent effort that he made in reminding our NATO allies of their obligations. However, my understanding, from talking to military people over the past couple of days, is that the contribution that the Estonians and Danes, for example, have been making under British command in Helmand has been recognised as first class and is very welcome.

Point of Order

4.33 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to my point of order yesterday and in view of the apparent media briefing regarding the contents of the Cabinet Secretary's report to the Prime Minister—for example, the political editor of *The Daily Telegraph* had an article up at 10 minutes to 1 containing information about what is in the report—will you inform the House on whether the Prime Minister has indicated that he will be making a statement to the House on the report's contents?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for advance notice of her point of order. I have received at this stage no such indication, but I am well aware of the intense interest in these matters in all parts of the House and of the wish that the House should have an opportunity to scrutinise them in detail. I understand that the report will be published later today, and it is clear to me that such scrutiny will be more effective when right hon. and hon. Members have had a chance to study it. It will not require telepathy to deduce that once the report has been published, an application for an urgent question—in the absence of any ministerial statement—will be the most effective way of pursuing that end. *[Interruption.]* I hope that that is helpful. It is always a pleasure for me to bring some happiness into the life of the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr MacShane).

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Sovereign Grant Act 2011
Energy Act 2011.

Concessionary Bus Travel (Amendment)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

4.36 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007 to broaden the definition of eligible journeys to allow people with complex mobility problems who cannot access public transport to use concessionary travel passes on community transport services; and for connected purposes.

I am sure that everyone in the Chamber is aware how much our constituents value the current concessionary travel scheme, even if we tend to argue about it come election time. Indeed, there are perhaps few issues that are more controversial. However, there is one imbalance in the application of the existing legislation that needs to be addressed—one that I fear was not in the minds of those who framed the legislation back in 2007. Able-bodied pensioners who can use existing public transport can use their concessionary travel cards without any problem, but anyone with the misfortune to be a disabled pensioner or to have complex mobility needs, who perhaps cannot even make it to the bus stop in the first place, might have to rely on dial-a-ride services, demand-responsive services or other forms of community transport. In many cases, such people will have to pay their own way because, in essence, the community transport sector does not enjoy the statutory benefits for which the concessionary card scheme allows.

To me, that imbalance seems to be not only unfair, but contrary to the spirit of human dignity. Community transport as a sector ranges from the dial-a-ride services that I have mentioned to wheels-to-work schemes for apprentices, demand-responsive bus routes and community car schemes. There are at least 60,000 community transport volunteers up and down the country. Indeed, one could argue that the sector was nothing less than the big society in action. As hon. Members may be aware, section 22 community transport services are beginning to play a crucial role in filling the gaps that are appearing in many rural bus networks. However, my proposals focus on services provided under section 19 of the Transport Act 1985, which allows not-for-profit organisations to charge for providing transport to those whom it serves, without the need to obtain a public service vehicle operator's licence. The provisions apply to any not-for-profit body associated with educational, religious, social welfare, recreational and other activities of benefit to the community.

I understand that many councils seek to subsidise travel for those who are disabled in various ways. However, not every council does, and with increasing budgetary pressures, which Members on both sides of the House must recognise, I fear that fewer and fewer will. For example, in my constituency, which is covered by two upper-tier councils, there are two ways in which those needs are fulfilled. Blackpool, for example, has an excellent dial-a-ride charity called Ride-Ability. One needs to be a member to access its services, and any member presenting a concessionary NoWcard with a blue stripe can obtain services for a half-fare. A disabled passenger with an orange NoWcard issued by the local authority can, on payment of 50p, obtain any single passenger journey that they wish to make. In Lancashire, however, the situation is slightly different in that the system is mileage related. People pay £2 to travel any distance up to two miles, and the fare goes right up to £10 for a journey of 18 miles or more.

I understand that, even as we speak, Blackpool council is reassessing whether to continue funding the Ride-Ability charity, which it subsidises to the tune of £112,000. One option that it seeks to adopt would involve restricting access to between 11 am and 3 pm, when the council's existing vehicles are not used by people with other forms of special transport needs. My fear is that that option would restrict individual freedom and spontaneity. I am not sure that I would like to have to live my life only between the hours of 11 am and 3 pm.

I realise that my proposal will be interpreted by many, including the Government, as a request for a spending commitment. I am often contacted by pensioners who ask why they have been given a concessionary travel card when they do not need one. They tell me that they can afford to pay their own way. I often reply, "Actually, you are not obliged to use your concessionary travel card. There is nothing to stop you paying your own way, if you wish to do so." That might be a sensible way forward, if the Government are concerned about how to fund the proposed extension.

Given the Government's current enthusiasm for de-ring-fencing spending, I note that they have ring-fenced £10 million to local government for community transport schemes, so they have already established a slight predisposition towards the sector. I also note the words of the Community Transport Association, which has written:

> "Any person unable to make use of their concession on existing eligible transport services as a result of disability, age or other limiting factor should be permitted to use it on other transport services, with the operators of those services being reimbursed by the administrators of the local concessionary travel scheme. All eligible passengers should receive equal access to services. However, the provision of this fair level of service to currently excluded individuals must not adversely affect the level or quality of service enjoyed by existing passengers".

That goes to the nub of the matter.

My proposals might strike some as an unwelcome and unnecessary extension of the concessionary scheme. I accept that the present system is not ideal, by any stretch of the imagination. It contains too many flaws, inconsistencies and perverse consequences. Anyone who has read the recent Transport Committee report on bus services will be aware that more and more people have a concessionary fare card, but do not have the bus services on which to use them. I would say to anyone present who disagrees with my proposals that all I am seeking to do is ensure that the welcome benefits that apply to one section of the community should apply to everyone, including those with particular complex mobility problems. This is not a matter of bus policy, or even of wider transport policy. It is simply a matter of human dignity.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paul Maynard, Dr Julian Huppert, Paul Goggins, Mark Lazarowicz and Mr Lee Scott present the Bill.

Paul Maynard accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2012, and to be printed (Bill 236).

Pensions Bill [*Lords*] (Programme) (No. 2)

4.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Steve Webb): I beg to move,

That the Order of 20 June 2011 (Pensions Bill [*Lords*] (Programme)) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs 4 and 5 of the Order shall be omitted.

2. Proceedings on Consideration shall be taken in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.

3. The proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

TABLE

Proceedings	Time for conclusion of proceedings
Amendments to Clause 1 and Schedule 1, and New Clauses relating to state pension age.	7.45 pm at today's sitting.
New Clauses relating to Part 2; Amendments to Clauses 4 to 17; New Clauses relating to the meaning of 'money purchase benefits'; remaining New Clauses; Amendments to Clauses 2, 3 and 18 to 33; New Schedules; Amendments to Schedules 2 to 5; and remaining proceedings on Consideration.	9 pm at today's sitting.

4. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 10 pm at today's sitting.

Briefly, as you will be aware, Mr Speaker, this Pensions Bill covers a wide range of issues. The issue that has understandably attracted most attention has been the one about state pension age. The programme motion thus gives that issue the lion's share of the time available for Report. There is a range of other important issues relating to private pensions, so the final hour or so is given over to all those issues. Rather than detaining the House by talking about talks, as it were, I commend the programme motion and hope that we can move on to debating the substantive issues.

Mr Speaker: Does Mr Timms or Mr McClymont wish to speak? There is no obligation on any right hon. or hon. Member to speak.

4.45 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Hon. Members will have noted that in his very brief speech the Pensions Minister did not mention my new clause 8. Debate on the first group of amendments is due to end at 7.45 pm. As a consequence, we will regrettably have only one hour and 15 minutes allocated to three further matters, including six Government new clauses and three Opposition amendments on automatic enrolment, and five Government new clauses and one Government amendment on money purchase benefits, before we reach my new clause. I do not know whether we will reach new clause 8, but I am, perhaps uncharacteristically, pessimistic. If we do not do so, the issue will, under the current proposals, come back to haunt us as we see the full cumulative effect of the change from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index basis.

I do not wish to open debate on my new clause now, but I want to put it on record, as I said on Second Reading, that the CPI has more often been lower than

[Hywel Williams]

the RPI. The figures announced today show a small difference between the two measures, with RPI at 5.6% and CPI at 5.2%. That, of course, is no guarantee for the future. I will not detain the House further on this matter now, as I hope to able to speak to new clause 8. I just wanted to make those points at this juncture.

Question put and agreed to.

Pensions Bill [*Lords*]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee.

Clause 1

EQUALISATION OF AND INCREASE IN PENSIONABLE AGE FOR MEN AND WOMEN

4.48 pm

Gregg McClymont (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 6, leave out 'December 1953' and insert 'April 1955'.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 3, page 1, line 8, leave out subsection (4).

Amendment 4, page 2, leave out lines 12 to 18 and insert—

'6th April 1955 to 5th May 1955	6th May 2020
6th May 1955 to 5th June 1955	6th July 2020
6th June 1955 to 5th July 1955	6th September 2020
6th July 1955 to 5th August 1955	6th November 2020
6th August 1955 to 5th September 1955	6th January 2021
6th September 1955 to 5th October 1955	6th March 2021
6th October 1955 to 5th November 1955	6th May 2021
6th November 1955 to 5th December 1955	6th July 2021
6th December 1955 to 5th January 1956	6th September 2021
6th January 1956 to 5th February1956	6th November 2021
6th February 1956 to 5th March 1956	6th January 2022
6th March 1956 to 5th April 1956	6th March 2022.'—*(Rachel Reeves.)*

Government amendments 13 and 14.

Amendment 5, page 2, line 19, leave out '1954' and insert '1956'.

Amendment 6, page 23, line 20, in schedule 1, leave out from '(a)' to end of line 22 and insert 'delete "2024" and replace with "April 2020".'.

Amendment 7, page 23, line 31, in schedule 1, leave out '6th December 2018' and insert '6th April 2020'.

Gregg McClymont: In my first foray from the Dispatch Box, I would like to say that I look forward to having a continuing dialogue with the Minister on this subject. He has a formidable reputation in this field. He told me at our first meeting that one of my former students is now his researcher; that, I think, makes him doubly formidable. I would also like to pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). She, along with thousands of women, has led the campaign to highlight the burden being placed on up to 500,000 women by the acceleration of the timetable for the equalisation of the state pension age. I think we can all agree that she has done a very important job of work.

We welcome the Government's concessions as laid down in the amendments, but we do not think they go far enough. The Government are no longer condemning 245,000 women to an extra waiting period of between 19 and 24 months, and that is welcome; but it is too little, too late. The cardinal fact about the Bill remains that 500,000 women will still have to wait up to 18 months longer, and 330,000 will have to wait exactly 18 months longer, before reaching their state pension age. The Government have chosen to break the all-party Turner consensus that women's state pension age should not reach 65 before 2020, and they have also broken the coalition agreement, which promised that women's state pension age would not reach 65 before that year.

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Steve Webb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont)—this is the only time I am ever going to say that—on his new post. He mentioned Lord Turner. Is he aware that following the improvements in demographic projections that have taken place since Lord Turner produced his report, he is now on record saying that if he had been writing his report then, he would have gone much further much faster?

Gregg McClymont: The Minister is of course right. I believe that since the Turner report, longevity predictions have risen by 6.5% for men and 5.5% for women. There is no doubt that the issue is complex—no one is denying that—and there may well be a case for going further faster, but the burden of my argument involves the half a million women who must wait for up to 18 months. Our view is that that is a disproportionate burden, imposed without fair and due notice.

Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregg McClymont: I should like to make a little more progress first. I shall be happy to give way after that.

In 2005, in the days when the Conservative party was trying desperately to shift the perception that it had not changed, the present Prime Minister said:

> "If you put eight Conservative men round a table and ask them to discuss what should be done about pensions, you'd get some good answers... but what you are less likely to get is a powerful insight into the massive unfairness relating to women's pensions."

Alok Sharma: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging that the Government have moved some way on the transitional arrangements, but may I ask him a question that I asked his predecessor, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), in Committee? How does he expect to fund the changes that he proposes?

Gregg McClymont: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the savings that we are discussing have absolutely nothing to do with the deficit? They will accrue from 2016 onwards.

Alok Sharma: What the hon. Gentleman has said is interesting, given that when the Labour party was last in power, it did not really bother about saving for tomorrow. This is what his predecessor said when the point was raised in Committee:

> "this is outside the period of the comprehensive spending review and the budget deficit reduction plan."—[*Official Report, Pensions Public Bill Committee,* 5 July 2011; c. 8.]

As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are not going to suddenly stop spending and raising money after the budget deficit has gone. If we keep making unfunded pension commitments, that will add to the deficit and the debt in the future.

Gregg McClymont: That was not so much an intervention as a speech. The fact remains that the difference between the Government's proposals and ours is £10 billion over 10 years. That is £1 billion a year. Is the hon. Gentleman really saying that a saving of that kind cannot be found in a more sophisticated way, without placing an unfair and disproportionate burden on those women? I do not agree, and nor does any other Opposition Member.

The Prime Minister was right when he suggested that if you put eight Conservative men around a table you would get some interesting answers on pensions, but you would not get the right answer. The Prime Minister was right then, and the Government are wrong now. The Minister's amendments are welcome, and I am sure that he would personally like to go further, but he does not sit at the Cabinet table, although perhaps pensions Ministers should be in the Cabinet. This concession thus remains too limited. Some 500,000 women will still have to wait up to 18 months longer before reaching state pension age.

Turning to a point the Minister made earlier, this is not an easy issue, and there are great challenges, including that of longevity. As people live longer, the state pension age needs to rise to ensure a decent state pension for all. Labour set in train the Turner consensus: the state pension to rise in line with earnings; the retirement age to rise to 68 by 2046; and private pensions to be opt-out rather than opt-in. Labour also maintained the timetable for equalisation set out in the Pensions Act 1995.

Members on the Government Benches ask why we did not implement that, but Labour made great strides on pensions. Some 1 million pensioners were lifted out of poverty between 1997 and 2010. That is a real achievement. The poorest pensioners were lifted out of poverty. No pensioner lives in absolute poverty any longer. I must also point out that we had to do that because the previous Conservative Government left the pension system, and particularly the poorest pensioners, in a very difficult situation.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The hon. Gentleman takes us back into the mists of history, but surely today's announcement can be warmly welcomed by all Members on both sides of the House? The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr Byrne) describes this announcement as "just a sticking plaster", however. I cannot think of any other sticking plaster in history which has cost £1.1 billion and helped 250,000 people. That cannot have been the case even when the right hon. Gentleman was at the Treasury.

Gregg McClymont: Perhaps because I have a historian's perspective, I do not consider 35 years ago to be the mists of time. I think that that era is relevant to our discussion of pensions today.

We cannot sit still and do nothing on pensions. We accept that changes have to be made; we have no complaint about that, and we accept the Minister's point about rising longevity.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has taken up his new post. I am sure he agrees that a balance must be struck between dealing with rising longevity by having a plan to increase the state pension age over time, and offering short-term certainty to women who need to be able to plan their personal finances. We must not keep adjusting our pensions policy just because longevity keeps on rising. A sensible balance must be struck.

Gregg McClymont: My hon. Friend makes her point with greater eloquence than I could muster, and she sums up the crux of our case.

Labour set two tests for the Pensions Bill, and the Government continue to fail both of them. They fail the first test of giving fair and due notice, to which my hon. Friend just referred. Even if amended in line with the Government proposals, the Bill will not give those 500,000 women fair and proper notice of the rise in their state pension age.

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): The hon. Gentleman did not respond to the earlier point about needing to strike a balance between what this country can afford economically and what any Government might like to do. As Age UK has said, £1 billion to help 250,000 women is a big step forward. We should welcome that, rather than play petty politics with it.

Gregg McClymont: Actually, I did answer that point very simply. This has nothing to do with the deficit, and there is a £10 billion difference between our position and that of the Government over the 10 years after 2016, which amounts to £1 billion a year. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that that £1 billion a year is a fair and balanced outcome, all I can say is that, given the greater burden being placed on 500,000 women, Labour Members disagree with him.

5 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions that the deficit will be brought down by 2015-16. That may be the case, but this country will still owe £1.14 trillion or £1.15 trillion. Does he think it fair and just that our children and their children, and probably their children, will be taking on that debt?

Gregg McClymont: Does the hon. Gentleman not understand his own Government's policy, which is to eradicate the structural deficit by 2015? *[Interruption.]* According to the Government, the deficit will have gone. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State, from a sedentary position, makes the distinction between debt and deficit. I can tell him that I am well aware of that distinction, but I suggest that Members on the Government Benches are not so clear on this. I say that because £1 billion a year is one 1,000th of the debt that the hon. Gentleman just—

Mr Jones *rose—*

Gregg McClymont: No, I will not give way again, because I have answered the hon. Gentleman's question very clearly. I will restate the point: £1 billion a year is one 1,000th of the national debt figure to which he just referred.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Iain Duncan Smith): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. I am wondering whether he taught my son, who is still at Oxford, as now I am really worried. Let me ask him a simple question. The simple fact is that he is getting confused. His argument was originally about the deficit and it has now drifted, rightly, into being about debt. However, debt is not some esoteric issue. If we do not pay off that debt and have a plan to pay it off, all our interest charges rise. The key thing is that it stacks up. Whether or not it is one 1,000th—or whatever he calculates—we have to make a start. We are making a major start on debt repayment. If, as he says, we are talking about only—as he says—£1 billion a year, he needs to tell us where he is going to find this sophisticated £1 billion to replace it?

Gregg McClymont: I thank the Secretary of State for his intervention. I am sure that his son is getting a better education than I could manage to provide, as he rather ungallantly suggested. The fact is that this is one 1,000th of the £1.3 trillion debt, and the issue is one of balance and proportion. Is £1 billion—

Brandon Lewis *rose—*

Gregg McClymont: I am sorry, but I have given way enough and I have to make progress.

Mr Marcus Jones *rose—*

Gregg McClymont: No, I will not give way. I am sorry to be able to quote some relevant arithmetic to Conservative Members—they do not seem to like it— but these are facts. Let me continue my point: £1 billion a year for 10 years is one 1,000th of our national debt.

Brandon Lewis *rose—*

Gregg McClymont: No, I will not give way.

Dame Anne Begg (Aberdeen South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gregg McClymont: I would be delighted to give way to my hon. Friend.

Dame Anne Begg: I, too, welcome my hon. Friend to his first outing at the Dispatch Box. Perhaps this exchange has just illustrated all too clearly why women are deserting the Tories in huge numbers—it is because they do not feel that they should be the ones who have to bear the burden of the debt that exists. It is that balance that the Government have failed to understand.

Gregg McClymont: My hon. Friend, with her usual sagacity, gets to the heart of the matter. Given that we are talking about a small amount of money in the scheme of things—*[Interruption.]* The two tests that we have set are: do the Government's plans give fair and due notice to the women concerned, and do those plans bear proportionately on all women affected? The answer is no and no. The Bill continues to place the longevity burden disproportionately heavily on women in their later 50s.

Mr Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Conservative Members may not be able to understand the point my hon. Friend is making, but Labour Members clearly comprehend it. The Government have given us a target for when they will have paid off the structural deficit—we are into different territory. I was hoping that my hon. Friend might tease out from the Government how much of the overall changes they are making to the social security budget will bear on women compared with on men and women.

Gregg McClymont: I thank my right hon. Friend for that very important point. This all bears on the fact that, for all the talk, the Government do not understand the difference between a deficit and a national debt. That is pretty clear from our discussion so far.

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregg McClymont: No, I will not.

Let me restate our case. The Bill fails our two tests: first, it fails to give fair and due notice of the rise in pension age to the 500,000 women concerned; and secondly, the burden falls disproportionately on this group of women.

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I am conscious that people watching this debate who are affected by it will begin to wonder whether we have somehow lost the plot. I have a constituent who has taken early retirement under deficit cuts and expected to get her pension when she was 64. She will now have to wait until she is 66 and she tells me that there will be a period when her money will simply have run out and she will have nothing to fill that gap. Does my hon. Friend agree that that could not by any stretch of the imagination be deemed to be fair?

Gregg McClymont: That bears precisely on the point. We are talking about real women and we must give due credence to their fears and anxieties, especially about due notice.

On fair notice, the fact remains that under the Government's amended plans some women will have only five years to prepare. The shock of having to adjust at such short notice to a rise in the pension age of between 12 and 18 months cannot be overestimated—this reflects the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Cathy Jamieson). These women feel genuine anxiety. The 500,000 women in question made decisions based on what they thought was a contract with the Government that they had paid into the system for a certain amount of time and would get their state pension at a certain age. The Government have moved the goalposts dramatically for these women; there is no getting away from that and it is another way in which the Government are breaking the consensus we appeared to have in 2010.

The Government are going down a dangerous path with this Bill, which sets a precedent by which the principle of reasonable notice of changes in citizens' state pension age is dramatically reduced. The precedent is important because as longevity rises and as the Minister already suggested, there will inevitably be further uplifts in the state pension age. The principle of reasonable notice is broken by this Bill.

The independent Pensions Policy Institute was very clear in its evidence to the Select Committee on Work and Pensions on that point. The 1995 Act gave women 15 years' notice and although the Pensions Policy Institute understood that longevity is rising and that it is necessary to make changes more quickly, it still maintained that 10 years needed to be the minimum notice that any woman was given.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I share his concern that the principle that the goalposts can be shifted with very short notice is serious. Does he agree that the problem with the longevity argument is that there are huge disparities in longevity according to people's occupations as well as geographically? I am sure that affects his constituency, as it does mine.

Gregg McClymont: The hon. Lady makes a good point. That is an issue that my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) often raises: averages can hide great disparities in social class as well as gender. That is a very important issue and I am sure the Minister is well aware of it.

The principle of reasonable notice is broken by the Bill. The Government's concessions do not meet the fair and proper notice test, which is a principle of crucial importance. The second test we set for the Government was the proportionality test. They are unfairly and disproportionately singling out women aged 57 and 58 for harsher treatment. I do not suggest that they have singled them out deliberately—of course not—but I do say that they are not doing enough to compensate those women who have lost out in a birth date lottery that is not of their making. These women cannot, on the whole, afford the burden that the Government are placing on them, and they have certainly done nothing to deserve it. The Government should not make those women carry the heaviest burden of rising longevity—that is unfair and unjust. Some 500,000 women will still have to wait between a year and 18 months longer than they would have to reach state pension age. As I have previously stated, 330,000 women—one third of a million—will have to wait exactly 18 months longer, with the psychological and financial burdens that imposes.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): There is a further, regional unfairness in relation to the availability of work. If people are to work for longer, where are the jobs to come from? That will affect the hon. Gentleman's constituency and mine as well as those in the north-east of England and many other places. Also, if people are filling jobs at the ages of 65 and 66, the knock-on effects on youth unemployment will be substantial.

Gregg McClymont: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. If women and men are to work for longer, we have to look at the figures for employment. My understanding is that up to 38% of women aged between 56 and 60 are not in employment at the moment. That is a real issue, which I am sure the Minister is considering.

The Bill fails the two tests, in that it is unfair and there is an undue lack of notice. It also fails the proportionality test. Take the case of Laura Davis, who is 57, single and suffers from a heart condition and

The Department does not collect data from NHS foundation trusts. Where an NHS trust obtains foundation trust status part way through any year, the data provided are only for the part of the year the organisation operated as an NHS trust.

NHS: Private Sector

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in what areas of NHS provision he expects private sector businesses to operate under his proposals for NHS reform. [73021]

Mr Simon Burns: We expect national health service services to be commissioned from the provider (or providers) best able to meet patients' needs and deliver value for taxpayers' money whether from the public, private or voluntary sector.

A plural system of provision already exists in the NHS, for example within primary care and mental health services. For services where there is competition between providers this must be fair, transparent and non-discriminatory. However, it will remain the responsibility of commissioners to take decisions, in the context of the mandate from the Secretary of State for Health on where services should be competing as a means to improving those services for patients.

NHS: Procurement

Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to introduce a system within the proposed new NHS structure to ensure that procurement practices achieve value for money; [74266]

(2) what assessment he has made of the extent to which NHS procurement practices enable the making of efficiency savings. [74267]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department has in place clear plans through the Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention (QIPP) workstream to support the national health service in making £1.2 billion in savings on procurement of goods and services over the next three years. This applies exclusively to NHS providers—NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts.

These savings are to come in four main areas:

reducing price variation (all providers to use best available prices)—£598 million;

efficiencies in back office organisation—£65 million;

improved use and management of stock —283 million; and

clinical efficiencies (release of time for more direct clinical work)—£142 million.

To support this, the Department is currently working on the finalising of key performance indicators to be introduced by April 2012 which can successfully measure improvements made by trusts in the management of their non-pay spend. The Department has also developed a new procurement strategy based around three key work strands of greater transparency on pricing; promoting and improving the national collaborative bodies such as NHS Supply Chain; and product standardisation and rationalisation. Following completion of consultations on these measures within the NHS, this new procurement strategy will be formally launched by April 2012.

In terms of procuring clinical services for NHS patients, the Health and Social Care Bill would provide for the Secretary of State to impose regulations on commissioners for the purpose of ensuring that they adhere to good procurement practice when commissioning health services for the purposes of the NHS.

Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* officials of his Department have had with NHS trusts on the sharing of best practice in respect of the adoption of money-saving technologies. [74269]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department actively pursues opportunities to support the national health service to share best practice in general and in particular on the adoption of money-saving technologies including:

collating a national register of local Quality, innovation, Productivity and Prevention (QIPP) digital initiatives for the direct purpose of bringing local teams together and sharing collateral;

providing guidance to local teams in using existing frameworks for money-saving technologies (such as online meeting services that provide direct cash-releasing savings); and

supporting other QIPP national workstreams such as QIPP Long-Term Conditions in bringing their local teams together in exploiting money-saving technologies.

In addition, officials within QIPP and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence have been in discussions with NHS trusts to identify case studies of best practice in how the NHS is improving quality and productivity while making efficiency savings across the NHS and social care—many of which utilise innovative technology.

These cases studies are available online at:

www.evidence.nhs.uk/qipp

Grahame M. Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of jobs in UK-based small and medium-sized enterprises that are dependent on NHS procurement or the NHS supply chain. [74973]

Mr Simon Burns: This information is not held centrally.

The Department is committed to encouraging the national health service to comply with the transparency requirements that apply to all Government bodies as set out in Cabinet Office guidance. This includes measures such as promoting the use of standardised forms such as pre-purchase questionnaires held on a centralised database, so suppliers can submit information once only; and encouraging NHS Supply Chain, Buying Solutions and other NHS procurement partners to simplify access for small and medium sized enterprises to their contracting activities.

NHS: Repairs and Maintenance

Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of future liabilities for NHS Trusts as a result of maintenance backlogs. [73092]

but the costs of this Tory-led Government's acceleration of the state pension age equalisation timetable targets a group with limited resources.

Alok Sharma: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregg McClymont: I hope that this is better than the previous intervention.

Alok Sharma: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making a passionate point, and he talks about social justice and fairness, but all those on whose behalf he speaks up will ask, "If the Labour party ever get back into power, will they enact these changes?" It is a fair question for everyone to ask, and it is fair that he gives us an answer today.

Gregg McClymont: After the hon. Gentleman's previous intervention, he did not listen to the answer; given that intervention, he did not listen to the answer I gave the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire. He just does not seem to get it.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregg McClymont: I am happy to give way to the hon. Lady, who I know is an expert on these issues.

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, welcome him to his post and declare an interest also as a woman whose state pension age was increased to 66 under the previous Government. Given the £10 billion—

Mr Duncan Smith: Eleven billion.

Harriett Baldwin: Eleven billion, that's right.

Given the £11 billion commitment that the hon. Gentleman is making, and the £12.5 billion commitment that the shadow Chancellor has made, at what point do these billions of pounds add up to real money in the minds of Labour Front Benchers?

Gregg McClymont: The hon. Lady talks about real money, but the situation is clear: we are proposing £20 billion of savings starting in 2016; her Government are proposing £30 billion of savings. This measure would involve £1 billion a year over 10 years.

I understand that the hon. Lady has some actuarial experience, so she must understand that no sensible Opposition or, indeed, Government would put down in law that five years down the line they will still be committed to the same proposal. That is just common sense.

Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we talk about billions on one side of the House and billions on the other, the great irony is that public borrowing is up, when based on the Government's predictions? If we are to talk about billions being out of place in terms of budgets, perhaps that is a good place for us to start.

Gregg McClymont: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Government are very good at finding money when they want to, yet, on issues that affect a significant number of women—half a million—and given the anxiety and financial cost involved, they just seem unmoved.

Let us reflect a little on the kind of women we are talking about. According to the Library, the median total private pension of a fit 56-year-old woman is £9,100. That is not £9,100 a year; that is £9,100 in total. The same figure for a man is closer to £53,000—and not only that: these women are more reliant than men on the state pension. Often, it is a woman's only source of pension income, and 40% of such women have no private pension savings at all—*[Interruption.]* No one suggests that that is the Government's fault, and that is a pretty simplistic suggestion from a sedentary position by the Minister, the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Maria Miller), but the fact is that 40% of these women whom the Government are going to make wait between one year and 18 months have no private pension. The state pension is all they have.

Mr Iain McKenzie (Inverclyde) (Lab): That particularly resonates with my constituents in Inverclyde, where over 1,000 women who do not have a large pension to look forward to will be affected by this Bill. These are women who have taken time out to look after their children and are now providing child care for their sons and daughters, and perhaps looking after elderly relatives as well. These are women who can ill afford to lose out on their state pension, and also needed the time to prepare for this.

Gregg McClymont: My hon. Friend is spot on. Caring is a very important issue in this context. A third of these women are already retired, in their late 50s, and are often caring for relatives. Of course, men have caring responsibilities too, but in significantly lower numbers than women.

These women also earn less, on average, than men. They have less chance of making up for the £7,800 in lost pension income that the 330,000 women waiting for 18 months are estimated to lose. If pension credit is added to that, some women are losing up to £11,000, and that is before taking into account the benefits that accrue at state pension age, such as the winter fuel allowance, free travel and so on. This is a serious financial loss to these women.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made the very point that I was going to make. These women are losing out not only on pensions, and potentially pension credit, but on the passported benefits that are so important for low-paid pensioners, such as the winter fuel allowance, free bus travel, free dental work and free prescriptions. Those things are really important to this group of women, and they will have to wait longer to receive them.

Gregg McClymont: That is absolutely right. There is no doubt that this is a significant blow to these 500,000 women. That is why we have tabled our amendments. If they were passed this evening, the 330,000 women facing an 18-month hike in state pension age would have restored to them the average amount of £7,800. If they were on pension credit, they would also have restored to them up to £11,000 and all the other benefits that

[Gregg McClymont]

accrue at state pension age that my hon. Friend mentioned. I say it again: this is a serious, significant issue for a large group of women.

Our amendments offer the Government one last chance to show women that they get it. We are all aware of the Government's growing problem with women voters. We hear the reports of the Prime Minister huddled in No. 10 surrounded by advisers and pollsters explaining to him just how grim the news is regarding the opinions of women voters. Support for this Government among women is falling off a cliff. According to the reports from inside No. 10, the pollsters are telling the Prime Minister that 25% more women than men believe that the economy is going in the wrong direction, while 10% more women than men are saying that cuts are falling unfairly on women—and no wonder, given this Bill, among other things. According to the leaks from inside No. 10, favourability towards the coalition among women is now 12 points lower than it was 18 months ago. Women are twice as likely to think that their children will have a worse life and less opportunity than their generation. Overall support from female voters for the Conservatives and for the Liberal Democrats has slipped significantly, and we know today that the Government are falling further behind in the polls.

Our amendments offer the Government a chance to show that they get it and that they understand that what matters to women is the impact of Government policies on their lives and the lives of their families. Our amendments offer the Government a chance to show belatedly, on an issue that matters, that they understand women's priorities. I commend our amendments to the House.

5.30 pm

Jenny Willott (Cardiff Central) (LD): This is slightly earlier in the debate than I expected to be called. I will speak briefly on the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) and the Government amendments.

I know that we will have a fuller debate later, but much of the Bill has complete agreement across the House and is extremely welcome. The changes to the state pension age seem to have overshadowed many of the other issues in the Bill. As I said on Second Reading, I and many of my Liberal Democrat colleagues were deeply concerned about the effect of these changes on women who are being asked to work significantly longer at short notice.

The hon. Gentleman who has just spoken—I will not repeat his constituency name, as saying it once was an achievement—said that the state pension age has to rise, and I think that we all accept that. We are all living longer. The gains in life expectancy have been significant and are continuing. In 1970, someone reaching 60 could expect to live for 18 years. Last year, that had risen to 28 years. That puts a significant financial burden on the state. By the time I retire, I fully expect the retirement age to be somewhere north of 70. Goodness knows whether there will even be a state pension by that point.

When we are increasing the state pension age, we need to ensure that it is done as fairly as possible. I and my colleagues, a number of whom are present, have been vocal in our efforts to change the timetable. I know that the Minister and his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions have been actively working within Government to ensure that the timetable is fairer and that those who are worst affected by the changes are protected. In my view, the initial draft timetable was not fair to the women who were worst affected. I am pleased that the Government have listened to the concerns that were raised by many people and have tabled today's amendments. I am sure that the Minister will tell us more about them in his summation.

Lilian Greenwood: I hear what the hon. Lady says, but will she explain to the 300,000 women who will have to wait longer than anybody else to receive their state pension—between a year and 18 months longer—why they should have to pay more of the burden than anyone else?

Jenny Willott: Later in my speech I will move on to comments that relate to the hon. Lady's point.

Capping the state pension age increase to a maximum of 18 months will protect 250,000 women, as we have heard, and 250,000 men. Therefore, 500,000 people will be better off as a result of the Government amendments. As we have heard, that is costing more than £1 billion. I am grateful to the Secretary of State and the Minister for managing to get £1 billion out of the Treasury. That is no mean feat. A problem with any change to the state pension is that the costs are in the billions, not the millions.

Fiona O'Donnell (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jenny Willott: I will make some progress first.

That problem makes it extremely difficult for small changes to be made. Given the financial circumstances, with the issues of debt and deficit that we have discussed, and the fact that other Departments are asking for money in the millions rather than the billions, convincing Treasury officials to be more generous cannot be easy. I hope that all hon. Members appreciate that the £1 billion going to these 500,000 people is a significant amount of money that has been found by the Government.

Hywel Williams: From the tenor of the hon. Lady's remarks, it sounds as though she is satisfied with the concession that the Minister has achieved. I congratulate him on the distance that he has gone and I do not underestimate the difficulties. However, is the hon. Lady confident that the women in her constituency who will still be affected will be as easily persuaded as her?

Jenny Willott: I was just going to move on to the fact that, although I am delighted by the changes, in an ideal world I would have liked us to go further. I would have liked to see the cap closer to 12 months than 18 months, but we are not in an ideal world and the cost associated with that would have been significant. I understand that the cost of capping at 12 months would have been close to £3 billion, which would have been a significant amount of money to find. That would have been an uphill struggle. We have to appreciate the scale of the money that has been found to make things better for the women who are worst affected.

There has been a broad coalition campaigning on this subject, including Age UK, Saga and Members of all parties. Some have been extremely constructive in their campaigning and in the pressure that they have put on the Government, whereas others have been slightly less constructive at times. Some of what the Labour party has proposed today is, I think, unrealistic. It is unhelpful to the attempt to make as much progress as we would like towards helping the women who are most affected.

The Labour amendments tabled in Committee and today on Report that would delay the entire increase by two years are not sensible or realistic. Regardless of what the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East says, £10 billion would be a huge black hole in the public finances, and it would be a significant amount that the Government would have to find. *[Interruption.]* I am told that it would be closer to £11 billion. I am not going to start the debt versus deficit debate again, but there would be a huge black hole if we accepted a Labour party proposal that would require an unfunded promise of £11 billion.

Gregg McClymont: I have a very simple question for the hon. Lady. Why take that money from these women?

Jenny Willott: I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman could clarify to us where the money that he proposes spending would come from. Unless we tackle the financial crisis in this country and the financial circumstances that we face, my child and all our children and grandchildren will be paying off the debt. We have to tackle the debt—it is real money that needs to be found, and a £10 billion black hole would be a significant one to fill.

Dame Anne Begg: Can the hon. Lady explain where the Government are finding the £1 billion that is needed to make the change that is being announced today?

Jenny Willott: I am really sorry, but I cannot tell the hon. Lady where the Minister has found the money. I am sure that if she asks him the same question later, he will respond.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I am sure we all have great sympathy with the women who have been most adversely affected by the changes, but do you not agree that the Labour party's argument would be far more credible if it were able to tell us where it would make up the difference? Then we would be able to decide on the matter, as opposed to being told, "It is only £11 billion, we should find it from somewhere else."

Jenny Willott: I completely agree. There is strong feeling throughout the House that in an ideal world, none of us would want to see the problem exist. We all accept that the state pension age will have to increase, because we are living longer and there is a black hole in the finances. I have said that in an ideal world, I would like to see the increase capped at 12 months, but we are not in an ideal world and we have to find a compromise that is workable and affordable. I appreciate that there are women who will be negatively affected by today's proposals, and I am sure that we all have huge sympathy for them. However, I am glad that the Government have found the resources needed to mitigate the difficulties faced by those who are most severely affected.

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady not agree that in politics, choices are constantly made, and that there are a number of choices that could be made in this case? There are those, for example, who argue that the 50% tax rate should be reduced at an early date, and there are those who argue that the generous tax reliefs given to people on higher rate tax who contribute to pension schemes could be ended, giving substantial savings. Does she agree that there are always choices, and it is not just a question of asking where a particular sum of money will be found?

Jenny Willott: I completely accept that political decisions are a matter of priorities and choices—all hon. Members understand that, because we are all involved in political debates and decisions. As I have said, in an ideal world, I would like the cap to be reduced. However, given the financial circumstances, the Government's proposal is a compromise that I can accept. I understand that some will be negatively affected, but we have made significant progress. Half a million women and half a million men will benefit from the proposals, which I accept as a positive compromise.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes the point that we are not in an ideal world. A large part of the reason why we are not in the world that we would like to be in is that the previous Labour Government left us with a record deficit. Labour Members are now talking about another £10 billion. Does she agree that it is ludicrous for them to talk about unfunded commitments, and that they should instead apologise for the mess that they left the country in?

Jenny Willott: We need to focus on what is realistic and affordable. The Bill will affect people's lives, and we need to ensure that the state pension is affordable and sustainable long into the future. I want to receive the state pension that I have paid into when I come to retire, and I am sure all hon. Members and people out there in the country would want the same thing.

I welcome the fact that Labour Front Benchers are now more positive toward to today's proposals, and that they are prepared to accept that the Government have moved to the significant benefit of a large number of women, even if a realistic approach is somewhat lacking in their proposed amendments.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does not the hand-wringing between 12 months and 18 months, and billions here and there, show the utter vanity of the UK spending billions on Trident nuclear weapons, when we are finding difficulty in paying money to old age pensioners?

Jenny Willott: The hon. Gentleman tempts me into an area into which I will not follow him. That is an issue for another day, although my position is probably not too dissimilar from his.

Given the financial circumstances and the constraints that the Government face, the deal proposed today is a good one. The Government's amendments substantially mitigate the worst problems, and we should bear it in mind that £1 billion is a huge amount of money.

[Jenny Willott]

I hope the Minister can now concentrate on introducing a flat-rate pension for those whose retirement age is increased. That would make a massive difference to the amount that people get from their basic state pension when they retire, and it will benefit women in particular. Will he confirm that he still plans to introduce a flat-rate pension for 2016, so that women who are affected by the state pension age increase that we are discussing will be the first, or among the first, beneficiaries? In that way, although they retire later, they will do so on a significantly enhanced state pension, which would mitigate some of the financial implications of the Bill.

I commend the Minister and his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions for their efforts, and for their achievement of parting £1 billion from the Treasury to make the changes better, so that the effects are mitigated for those who are hardest hit. I hope that he continues to work to improve retirement income for both men and women.

Malcolm Wicks (Croydon North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jenny Willott). I may touch on some of her themes as I make progress.

The Minister will forgive me for repeating some of the issues that I have raised before, not least in Committee. My main point is this: pension policy in Britain has always been at its best when it goes with the grain of how our society works and of how our people work and live. It is also at its best when we have the courage for long-term planning, with time scales and periods of notice that enable men and women to plan their lives and their retirement properly.

This Parliament first legislated for old age pensions more than 100 years ago, because it started to understand the extraordinary fact that, for the first time in broad numbers, working people were outliving their working lives: hence the need for an income in old age. We then had the great national insurance reforms, which the Liberal party should have much credit for introducing, including particularly those in the great report by the Liberal reformer, William Beveridge.

5.45 pm

I was thinking of William Beveridge as I was listening to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central. When Beveridge produced his report in 1942, it was hardly in the most auspicious public spending circumstances. He, and those in the Labour party who supported the Beveridge plan, was subject to huge opposition from many—but not all—in the Tory party, and particularly from the Treasury. Imagine the huge opposition from the Treasury to the outlandish idea that we could have a new national insurance settlement in the post-war world, at a time when we did not know where our pennies were coming from. But today the Liberal party has been blown away by a little puff from the lips of the Treasury. Thank goodness that in the 1940s there were decent strong Liberals, who were not blown away when the Tory monetarists spoke.

If Beveridge's national insurance plan enabled us to see a future that still lasts today, we can think of other things that ran with the grain of how people worked and lived in this country, not least the home responsibilities payments, which started to recognise that women had children and needed to leave the labour market, but should be properly insured for those responsibilities through the national insurance system. Later we introduced similar provisions for those caring for elderly relatives and others.

We face the challenge of longevity and we are all united in understanding the demography. Pension ages in both the occupational sector and the state sector need to increase, and that is where we reach agreement. However, I disagree with the crude, deficit-influenced way in which this policy is being forced through Parliament. The coalition Government assume certain points that I wish to question.

One assumption is that, broadly, everyone in society is benefiting from improved longevity and will live well into their late 70s and 80s, regardless of their social class and location. Where we live in our cities, towns and rural areas is closely related to socio-economic status.

Stephen Metcalfe: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Malcolm Wicks: Not at the moment, because I want to set out the three assumptions before I deal with the hon. Gentleman's false—or possibly accurate—assumptions.

The second assumption is that British people live and work in similar ways. It is assumed that we start work and retire at more or less the same. The third assumption is that if we increase—as it appears we will—the pension age and the age of retirement, work will somehow be available. If people do not retire until 66 or 67, it is suggested that this Government's extraordinarily brilliant economic and employment policies will deliver labour for the people. It is those three assumptions that I wish to question.

Stephen Metcalfe: Longevity and extended life expectancy are key to this argument. You point out that longevity is not necessarily equally spread across society. Are you saying that certain sectors of society have benefited from improved longevity more than others, and that for some, life expectancy has not risen at all?

Malcolm Wicks: Certainly for some people it has not, but broadly speaking it is my understanding that it has risen for all socio-economic groups. My assumption is that it will continue to increase, but it is the differences by social class that the hon. Gentleman's question enables me to tease out—

Stephen Metcalfe: Will you give way on that point?

Malcolm Wicks: With respect, I think that what I have to say will be helpful to the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure that he will tell me where I get it wrong, if I do.

I want to analyse mortality by social class. I shall talk about men in particular, although there is a class difference among women too. People in social class 7 tend to be in routine occupations. For example, they might be labourers, van drivers, packers or cleaners; many women would be cleaners. We hear a lot about longevity and how we will all live to 100: the Minister keeps telling us—he issues a press notice every few months—that one fifth or one sixth of us will live to 100. It might surprise the House, therefore, that 19%—almost one fifth—of men from social class 7 die before the age of 65. Almost one fifth of these hard-working working-class people in tough jobs—no doubt they have had tough lives too—die before 65.

I put that point to the Minister and the House because, before glibly raising the pension age to 66 or 67, we need to recognise that many of our fellow citizens do not live to 65. Furthermore, 10% of women in social class 7 die before the age of 60, while among the professional classes, that figure is only 4%. I should have said earlier that, in contrast to the 19% figure, the proportion of men in the professional classes who die before the age of 65 is 7%. So there is a huge social class differential, and if we are not careful—we need to do the arithmetic very carefully—and if we glibly increase the pension age, we might rule out more and more people from ever getting their old age pension.

Steve Webb: The right hon. Gentleman raises some important issues. I do not think that he was Pensions Minister at the time, but he will be aware that it was the Pensions Act 2007 that ultimately raised the state pension age to 68. Why did he support that, given the points that he is making now?

Malcolm Wicks: I recognised the logic of demography and longevity and the need to raise pension ages, but since ceasing to be a Minister of any kind, I have had more opportunity to think about this and to study it—*[Laughter.]* The Minister might try thinking independently. It is not a bad idea. I would not giggle at the idea that we rethink our positions from time to time. I have rethought my position on this, not least because the Government are going helter-skelter towards raising the pension age in ways that the Labour Government never foresaw.

Stephen Metcalfe: I am grateful to you for giving way for a second time. You said that 19% of men in social class 7 die before they reach 65. Of those, how many were in work at the time? Is this a social problem relating to health, or is it caused by the nature of the work that they have done? I ask because I am concerned that we are saying that we cannot raise the pension age because of this particular group, when in fact everyone's life expectancy, regardless of how tough a life you have, has increased over the past 20 or 50 years.

Malcolm Wicks *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. May I help the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe)? I follow closely the question of women's pension age and longevity, but he should not be addressing me—which is what he is doing when he says "you"—he should be addressing the rest of the Members in the Chamber. He has used that term several times now, and I gently ask him to observe the convention.

Malcolm Wicks: I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman how many of those people were still working when they died—although I want to say something later about the circumstances of that group of people.

Richard Graham: The right hon. Gentleman has much experience in these matters. However, may I put it to him that the reason why he voted in 2007 for the increase in the pension age was simply that the statistics to which he referred had changed so much? In 1911, when the first pensions were introduced—to be paid at 65—the average life expectancy of a male in the United Kingdom was 66. He made the point that some people today still die before the age of 65. Back in 1911, the vast majority of males died before that age. Life expectancy today is now 87 for the average male. Does he not agree that the changes in the state pension age reflect a huge change in longevity, and that the pension age has actually risen very slowly?

Malcolm Wicks: I am bound to say that life expectancy is not 87. On average, a girl born in the UK will live to 82 and a boy to 77. Obviously, however, once they have survived to the age of 65 many people are likely to live into their 80s, so I understand the broad point being made.

I shall conclude later by talking about a sensitivity that we could introduce into the system that might meet some of those problems, although the Minister has so far resisted it. However, now I want to refer to the association between social class and location, which various colleagues are interested in and knowledgeable about. This is not just about the broad difference between living in Kensington and living in parts of Glasgow; even within many of our big cities there are huge class differences in mortality. Across Sheffield, for example, there is a difference in life expectancy of more than 14 years between different parts of the city, and even in Kensington and Chelsea—the borough with the highest life expectancy—there is a difference of eight years between the most and the least deprived wards—which, for those of us who know Kensington, is not so surprising. Those differences and unfairnesses are reflected in terms of where people live in our cities.

Before I mention the idea that I have been trying to persuade the Minister to accept, I want to apply some pressure elsewhere: where will the jobs come from? We are living through a period of rising unemployment, and many people, including graduates with good degrees, in their 20s, 30s and 40s, cannot get jobs. Are we confident that if we make these accelerated changes—as the Minister knows, the acceleration is the difference between what the Labour Government did and what the coalition Government are doing—the work will be available?

Now 39% of 62-year-old men and 52% of 64-year-old men are not working, which means that huge proportions of men approaching what is meant to be their retirement are effectively retired from the labour market already. Furthermore, 36% of 58-year-old women are not working. I fear that we will be extending a kind of benefit twilight zone, in which people who are ineligible for their state pension—because we are raising the pension age—will jog along on incapacity or other benefits, with no one in the jobcentre pretending that those folks will get work—even the Minister will not be able to pretend that they will—and a huge army of people living in a state of desperation in that twilight zone.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will share our concerns about last week's unemployment figures, which showed an increase

[Jim Shannon]

among young people and women. Is there not a concern that unemployment levels for women are rising, and does that concern not need to be expressed tonight in the House?

Malcolm Wicks: That is the concern. Ironically, we are having this debate while the spectre of mass unemployment—as Liberals will remember, William Beveridge called it the giant evil of idleness—rears its ugly head, yet we are accelerating the increase in the age at which people will get their retirement pension.

Hywel Williams: The geographical variation is extremely gross if one adds in people who are economically inactive. The proportion of people who are economically inactive varies from place to place. Merthyr Tydfil is an obvious example in Wales. Last time I looked, the constituency of Witney had three economically inactive people searching for each job, while in the Rhondda that number was 154. That is a gross variation, and is not something to be disregarded.

6 pm

Malcolm Wicks: That is an extraordinary variation, and one of the implications is that in order to make good policy and ensure good practice in pensions and other areas, we in this Parliament—including those on the Government Benches—need to have some understanding of how people work, and not just think of our own circumstances.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point given the current economic circumstances, but we do not know what the employment circumstances will be in 2016 or 2020. Does he agree that the more essential point is that because people see investing in their pensions as a long-term decision, it is the short-term way in which these changes are being introduced that is creating all the unfairness? People had certain expectations and had made contributions, but the benefit from those contributions is now being denied them.

Malcolm Wicks: Yes, hence my introduction, when I argued that pensions policy in this country has always been at its best when it goes with the grain of how people live and makes long-term decisions that individuals can plan around. It is the acceleration of the process that we are now discussing. It is extraordinary that, having taken so much money out of the pensions system, the Conservatives—and, I suppose I have to say, the Liberals—now want credit for putting some of it back. That is a bit of Tory arithmetic that I am not terribly impressed by.

Harriett Baldwin: Does the right hon. Gentleman not welcome, as I do, the additional £25 billion going into the triple lock of the state pension, which, as of today, will protect pensioners from the rise in inflation?

Malcolm Wicks: That issue—how the shift from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index will affect the real value of pensions in future—is a subject for another day, although colleagues might want to touch on it today. My guess is that that shift, which seems quite dry and technical, will become the big pensions swindle of the 21st century. I am therefore not quite as impressed by the triple lock as the loyalist hon. Lady is.

Harriett Baldwin *rose—*

Malcolm Wicks: However, I will give her another chance.

Harriett Baldwin: Does the right hon. Gentleman not acknowledge that whereas his proposal was to uprate the state pension in line with average earnings, which would mean an increase of 1.8%, the triple lock chooses the best of the three? That is an incredibly important reinforcement of our state pension.

Malcolm Wicks: Yes, but I hope that the hon. Lady will consider my point about CPI and RPI, because we are talking about billions of pounds that could be lost to British pensioners when that change is implemented over coming decades.

Let me reach my conclusion. We suffer from over-generalisations in this field. I am fed up with macho commentators, often from the political, professional and business class, who somehow assume that everyone will live to a ripe old age and that those in their 60s will have portfolios full of all sorts of opportunities—a directorship here, writing a book or doing a television programme there. Many people, not least those on the Government Benches, talk about a world of that kind—I do not want to get the hon. Lady over-excited: she has had many chances to respond, but she knows who I am talking about. Given the typical life cycles for the late 20th and early 21st centuries, more and more of our children and grandchildren will effectively not get started in their careers until their early 20s or even their mid-20s. With the rise of university education, the pattern of many people's working lives will be like that.

However, that pattern is not at all typical of everyone in our society. When we recall the question that the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) asked about the mortality of those people, let us remember that there are still many working people coming up to retirement who started their working lives as 15 or 16-year-olds. They are the packers, the cleaners, the van drivers, the heavy manual workers and the care workers. By the time they reach retirement they are worn out. They are physically knackered, if I am allowed to use those words. They are tired, they are exhausted and what they need, in an old-fashioned sense, is a rest. They need to retire. They are not people like the hon. Gentleman, who I suspect will still be sprightly in his late 60s and 70s, with his portfolios and all the rest of it; they are physically worn out. They have been working since they were children, and they need a rest.

Stephen Metcalfe: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making a powerful argument and some interesting points, but they relate to increasing the state pension age, full stop. This is not an argument about the escalation of that process; it is an argument about whether we should change the age at which people can claim their state pensions, which is separate from the debate that we are currently having.

Malcolm Wicks: My argument is that it is wrong to treat someone who starts work at 15 or 16 equally to someone who starts their first proper job at 21 or, with post-graduate qualifications, 23, 24 or 25. People who start earlier have often been in the labour market doing tough manual work—tougher work than any of us have ever done—for 10 more years than the likes of us. My argument is that we should reconstitute our national insurance system to recognise the contributions that they have made, so that anyone in work for, say, 49 years and paying contributions throughout that time should at the very least be able to take not an early pension, but a pension at a more reasonable age. If that brings about a difference between when they take their pension and when their grandchildren who went to university take theirs, that would be fair.

If we do not start to understand some of these social, employment and class sensitivities as we helter-skelter towards higher state pension ages, we will make mistakes and, with great unfairness and injustice, and leave people behind. Many of those people will never get their pensions, because they will be dead before they qualify for them. That is not a sign of a decent British pensions system that understands how our society is evolving.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I rise to speak on behalf of the hundreds and possibly thousands of women who have contacted me on this matter. I also speak as a woman who is directly and personally affected by the Government's changes, so I am in a position to tell the Government what is happening to women of a certain age when it comes to pensions.

The women who have contacted me have told me that they expected changes in the pension age. They know that we are all living longer—or rather, that some of us are—that we need to plan for our retirement better and over a longer period, that we need to pay more for our pensions and that there needs to be some equalisation between when men and women access their pensions. They understand and recognise all that. However, it is the speed at which the changes are being implemented that is causing anxiety and fear among women who no longer have time to plan and save for their future.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I, too, have been contacted by hundreds of concerned women in my constituency. Although we acknowledge the Government's concessions, which they probably made because of the pressure that those women have put on them, they will not meet everybody's needs. Hundreds of my constituents will still be up to £11,000 worse off, with not enough time to plan for a reasonable pension in their old age.

Pat Glass: I absolutely agree. This is just one more Government policy, on top of others that directly affect women and young people more than any other group, that will impoverish women. Whatever last-minute fixes the Government come up with, it remains wrong to penalise disproportionately women who happen to be between the ages of 56 and 58, many of whom have worked all their working lives. Many of them will have held several jobs in order to keep their families. They have paid their taxes and their bills, and, quite frankly, they deserve better than this.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady accept that the pension is one of the few certainties in life and that it is now being ditched for women of a certain age, as she aptly puts it? Those women have planned meticulously for when their retirement will begin and what they will use their pension for. They have planned how it will be broken down into housekeeping and into meeting the needs of their grandchildren, for example, but that is all being thrown askew by these proposals.

Pat Glass: Absolutely. This is causing not just anxiety but fear among those women, many of whom have been barred, until recently, from private company pension schemes because they were having to work in several part-time jobs with very low incomes in order to keep their families. They are now being let down by a Government who are simply not giving them sufficient time, which is all that they are asking for, to plan for the change.

Dr Whiteford: Given what we have heard from the right hon. Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) about the failure of people's health to keep up with the increase in longevity, does the hon. Lady agree that many of those women will not be in the best of health and will be having to look for jobs at a time when their health might be compromised and they are not nearly as fit as they used to be?

Pat Glass: I absolutely agree.

The Chancellor has told us that he will not balance the books on the backs of the poor abroad, so why is he prepared to balance the books to a disproportionate degree on the backs of 500,000 women who just happen to have been born between 6 October 1953 and 5 March 1955? Why is it okay to do that to those women? The Government need to listen to the women of this country and accept Labour's amendment so that no woman will have to wait more than an extra 12 months to reach their state pension age.

Richard Graham: I am delighted to be called to speak in the debate. I welcome amendments 13 and 14, which show that the Government have listened to their people, and I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Pensions Minister on successfully providing some relief to women in their 50s in my constituency. I pay tribute to all those from Gloucester who came to see me about this issue, led by Patsy Toleman, and to those who were encouraged by the campaign led by Age UK to write to me about it.

Like others on both sides of the coalition Government, I have been very active in writing to and making the case personally to the Secretary of State and the Chancellor, and I am sorry that the Opposition have been less than generous in their recognition of the value of capping at 18 months the increase in the wait for their pension for 250,000 women. They should perhaps be reminded that Age UK has said that

> "we can't emphasise enough the great achievement that this change represents as it will cost the Government £1 billion in lost cuts to expenditure."

Fiona O'Donnell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Graham: I will be more generous than the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) was earlier; I will give way.

Fiona O'Donnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity. He might find us ungenerous, but I wonder how many of those women who came to see him have been in touch over the past few days to tell him that the Government have gone far enough.

Richard Graham: I have not heard specifically from any of those who originally lobbied me on this issue. No doubt they will be hearing this debate, and I think that they will recognise, as all Members should do, that the Government cannot simply brush aside the issue of expenditure as those on the Opposition Front Bench did when they were in government. The interest that all our families are having to pay on the mountain of national debt built up by the hon. Lady's party over the past 13 years means that an amount greater than the entire education budget is being spent on debt interest alone. That affects every woman in her constituency and in mine.

6.15 pm

I welcome the statement by the Pensions Minister that he intends to end the uncertainty for women who are waiting to learn what their state pension age will be, and that he will be communicating with those who are affected so that they can properly plan for their future. As the right hon. Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) said earlier, uncertainty about planning is an issue, and I am glad that the Minister will be addressing it. He will no doubt say something about that later.

I also welcome other aspects of today's announcements, particularly the move to simplify the single-tier pension system, which will significantly benefit women who have had to take time out of the labour market because of their caring responsibilities, as many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Dame Anne Begg), have pointed out. I should be grateful if the Pensions Minister could also say something about that.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman has rightly said that the Government have listened to the case that has been made, that they have made additional money available and that they will give people some notice of the changes in the pension age. Does he accept, however, that for many people who are carers, for example, or who are in part-time work or in and out of work for other reasons, the time horizon that is now being made available to them will not give them much chance to plan for their retirement?

Richard Graham: In a perfect world, everyone would have liked the changes to have gone further, but I believe that capping the additional waiting period at 18 months represents a significant step forward in providing time for preparation. We are not, alas, living in a perfect world—

Pat Glass: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Graham: I should like to finish answering the previous intervention before I take the next one.

I am sure that the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) would agree that tonight is all about a welcome change for all of us.

Pat Glass: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. We have heard several Members on the Government Benches talk about a perfect world, but does he accept that we did not have a perfect world in 1909, when the first pensions legislation was discussed, and that we certainly did not have one in 1945? Other Governments nevertheless saw that it was right not to take this kind of action, despite the very difficult financial circumstances in which they found themselves.

Richard Graham: I do not believe that that analogy is relevant. As I pointed out earlier to the right hon. Member for Croydon North, any analogy that stretches to compare today's announcements with those in the original pensions legislation in 1911 is inaccurate, because it leaves aside the critical factor that life expectancy back then was hugely different from what it is now. In fact, the vast majority of people then did not live long enough to collect their pension, whereas today people will be living for 40, or possibly 50, years beyond their pension age—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) is chuntering away, but the reality is that there are people in the public service who are drawing their pension in their 40s or early 50s, and it is not inconceivable that they will live for another 40 years.

Lyn Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Graham: I will not give way on that point.

The arguments of the Opposition, who tabled amendments 1 to 7, have been extremely disappointing. My constituents will have heard three main points from the Opposition Front Bench. First, the Opposition have opposed the changes made by the Government on the basis that they do not go far enough. Secondly, the Opposition have strongly intimated that if elected in 2015, they would not implement the changes that they recommend tonight, which reeks strongly of hypocrisy. Thirdly, they have made it clear that they are not concerned about the additional £11 billion costs of their proposals, as they could be dealt with in the future and, therefore, should not affect our debate today. That is an entirely irresponsible attitude, which is entirely in keeping with the words of the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury when he announced that he was sorry there was no money left. It is very disappointing that the same philosophy is still strongly in evidence from the Opposition Front-Bench team.

Brandon Lewis: I was in the Chamber when the shadow Minister commented on £1 billion a year being only one thousandth of the debt, thus implying that it was a small amount of money. If we are talking about people being in touch with reality, surely my hon. Friend would agree that people outside this place will wonder about the economic credibility of an Opposition party that says £1 billion is not a lot of money.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. As an American economist once said, "A billion here, a billion there, and sooner or later you have a large sum of money". It is disappointing to hear such an irresponsible approach to spending and to the interest being paid by everybody in this country on our vast mountain of national debt.

Let me conclude. Tonight, I shall vote in favour of amendments 13 and 14. I recognise the significant achievement, to which Age UK has paid tribute, represented by the welcome changes that will benefit large numbers of women across the country. I pay tribute again to those women in my constituency who lobbied me on the issue, for whom I fought a long and quiet campaign with Ministers. I shall not vote for amendments 1 to 7, and I greatly regret the fact that the Opposition continue to table motions that they would not implement were they in power.

Dame Anne Begg: The Government's amendments are an admission that they realise, at long last, that they got it very wrong about the acceleration of the new state pension age for women. On Second Reading and in Committee, there was always a promise that the Government would come up with some sort of transitional arrangements for the group of 500,000 women who will have to wait more than a year, and particularly for the group of 33,000 women who will have to wait for two years before qualifying for the state pension. However,all they have done is to shift the timetable six months later. Why cannot they go the whole hog and take the anomaly out of the system altogether? If they were to do as the Opposition ask and delay all the increases to the age of 66 until after 2020, once the initial transition is over for women between 60 and 65, there would be no anomaly that would require transitional or any special arrangements at all. There would then be no unfairness specifically to women—it is, of course, only women who have been affected by the changes—and that would also answer the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) about the lack of time available for the group of women affected to prepare for the new pension age.

If the Government have recognised that issue, it is a shame that they could not go further. I suspect it is probably because the Minister, to whom I pay tribute, has found that getting anything out of the Treasury is like getting blood out of a stone. I recognise that getting just over £1 billion is a huge achievement, but in the overall scheme of things, and given the effects of the change, it would have been better—it would have been better if acceleration had not been proposed in the first place—if the problems had been properly recognised.

Before Government Members applaud themselves and welcome the change too much, perhaps we should think about the enormous campaign that was waged against the proposals. Would that campaign have existed if the Government had proposed at the outset what they propose now? In other words, when all this started, if it had been proposed that there would be an acceleration of the women's state pension age up to 66 before 2020 so that 300,000 women would have to wait 18 months longer—on top of the delay they were already facing because of the timetable already set—would there have been the same outcry and the same campaign? I think that the answer to that question is unequivocally yes.

Just because the Government have made something bad slightly less worse, it does not mean that what is being proposed is not particularly bad. Someone who, after an accident, is told by a surgeon that they will lose both their legs, and who finds out after they come out of the anaesthetic that they have lost only one might feel a degree of elation that this was better than they had expected. However, someone going into an operation expecting to lose a leg who does lose one would still feel disappointed. In other words, the amendments that we are being asked to vote on still do not amount to a good deal for the group of women concerned.

Richard Graham: I simply want to observe that if any of us went into an operation expecting to lose both legs and a doctor managed to save one of them, surely we would feel that the doctor had done rather a good job. The analogy with the Minister's announcement this evening is not irrelevant.

Dame Anne Begg: The hon. Gentleman has just made my point for me. Yes, we would feel a lot better, but if we had gone into the operation not expecting to lose either leg, but discovered afterwards that we had lost one, we would be absolutely devastated. The result would appear to be the same, but the emotional trauma caused in the meantime is quite different. That is exactly the position faced by these women.

The women we are talking about are not rich; they are not people for whom a billion pounds here or there amounts to pennies or not much money. These are women who have made the financial calculation that they will be able to get their state pension at a particular age. Some of them are still making the calculation that they will get the state pension at 60. I received an e-mail today from someone who could not understand why her pension age had gone up by 30 months. It is because she had not taken into account the original equalisation. That is no fault of the Government, but it illustrates the fact that people need a lot of time to prepare for the change, and even if they have had the time, they are not always prepared for it.

For the group of women who had not realised that the state pension age was going up to 65, it is a double whammy to discover that it is now going up to 66 and that they must face waiting that extra time, perhaps with no income at all. Many of these women will be in that position, even if they have taken early retirement for one reason or another. We know that by the age of 65, only about 40% of women are still in work; they might have fallen out of work for various reasons. Those women will have been depending on getting not just the basic state pension, but probably pension credit and all the other passported benefits that were mentioned earlier. For these women, there is a big hole in their financial planning. We have heard much about the Government's debt meaning that they cannot possibly afford to do right by the group of women concerned, but the effect will be on those women's personal debt. They will have to borrow money or in many cases live in pretty dire circumstances if they do not get the pension when they were expecting to get it.

Lyn Brown: Does my hon. Friend agree that these women will have to use any small amounts of capital they have to tide them over until their pension kicks in, possibly making them more reliant on state aid once they reach retirement?

Dame Anne Begg: Indeed, and there will be many such examples.

Women who hoped that their campaign would move the Government feel very disappointed. It is true that those in one group may have to wait for 18 months

[Dame Anne Begg]

rather than two years, but they are still extremely disappointed at the Government's failure to recognise that what they propose will have a disproportionate effect on a number of women who no longer have time to plan adequately for the future.

6.30 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): The hon. Lady is being very generous in giving way.

Age UK led the campaign that generated so much awareness of the issue among women and prompted them to raise their concerns, rightly, with their Members of Parliament. Age UK has welcomed what the Government have done, and has acknowledged that 90% of women will now work for only one extra year. I know that the fact that 10% may have to work for an extra 18 months is a challenge for them, but this is a solution for that 90%, and campaigners have welcomed it.

Dame Anne Begg: It is not a solution for the 90%, because they will still have to work for an extra year, on top of the extra years for which they were already having to wait for their state pensions. I believe that Age UK made that comment at the time of the Government's announcement. Of course all Members agree that the position is better than it was before, but it is still not good enough. If my inbox is anything to go by, women who thought that their problems would be solved when they first heard the announcement have now made their calculations and discovered that for a large number the goalposts have not been moved at all, and that they have been moved by only a small amount for others.

In my view, it is a pity that the Government ever went down this route. They could have begun the accelerated rise in the pension age to 66 after the completion of the equalisation, between 2020 and 2022, rather than in the period before 2020. Obviously some wonk at the Treasury thought "What a good idea this is—it will save billions of pounds", without recognising the anomaly that it would create and the difficulty that it would cause for this group of women. If Conservative Members want to know why their stock among women is falling rapidly, I will tell them. The fact that the Tories do not understand that decisions such as this suggest that they imagine women can somehow cope with reductions in their income has made women realise that many of them simply do not understand their lives or appreciate their problems.

The Government's proposal may be better than what was in the original Bill, but if we vote for it tonight our decision will be final, because that will then be the timetable for the acceleration of women's pension age to 66. Labour Members believe that certainty is necessary when it comes to pensions and that we must allow people to plan in advance, but whoever wins the next election, the last thing that any Government will be in a position to do is start fiddling with the system. What is fundamental to our argument is that a group of women have had no chance to plan, and I see no way in which any Government will be able to deal with that.

Harriett Baldwin: Is the Chair of the Select Committee confirming that a pledge to reverse the position, in line with the amendment, will not feature in the next Labour manifesto?

Dame Anne Begg: I may be Chair of the Select Committee, but I am afraid that I have no direct say in what should be in a Labour or any other manifesto. However, common sense tells us that whoever is in power after the next election—the Liberal Democrats might have a majority then, and might want to reverse the arrangement—voting against the amendment tonight will remove any chance of our ever finding a solution for this group of women. Events will have moved on, the timetable will have been set, and the pension age will have already changed by the time of the next election. That is what I mean about the lack of time in which to plan.

I hope that Members will accept that it is wrong that this anomaly has been created. I hope that those who have listened to the women in their constituencies will do the right thing tonight, and will vote for the Opposition amendment. That is what I shall be doing.

Fiona O'Donnell: I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity to support the amendment to which my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) spoke so eloquently. I welcome him to the Dispatch Box.

Many women in my constituency have contacted me about this issue, and none of those who have contacted me over the weekend, yesterday or today have expressed the view that the Government have gone far enough; they all support the amendment. I found it almost stomach-turning to hear the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jenny Willott) congratulate herself on winning this concession from the Government. I do not think that even Labour Members should take credit for the achievement—lacking though it is in ambition—and I certainly do not think that the Liberal Democrats should do so. I wish that some of the honourable and good Liberal Democrat members of the Bill Committee mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) had had the guts and the principle to propose similar amendments when they had the opportunity. This feels a bit like Groundhog Day: it is the Health and Social Care Bill all over again.

Credit for the victory, such as it is, lies with all the women who have written to us, e-mailed us, telephoned us, and come to the House to make their case. They have said, "We will not sit back and let the Government do this to us." Every evening as I leave this place, I see a touching reminder in the poster in the tube station showing those women, although I must confess that at first I considered it rather strange that there was also a man in the photograph, and wondered what that could be about. The fact is that this change will have an impact not just on the women concerned, but on the families for whom they have made plans. In the light of the rising cost of child care, they have asked themselves, "When can I help my sons and daughters to make better lives for themselves and their families?" I have to say that I think my sons and my daughter have similar plans for me, which I intend to resist for as long as possible.

The Government, particularly the Liberal Democrats, have not just broken their promise to women; they have broken their promise to their families as well. What an appalling lack of ambition from a Government! They have repeatedly called on Labour Members to say how we would pay for our proposals, so let me give them a couple of examples. Through the future jobs fund, they could take a million young people off the dole queue so that they were back at work and contributing to the system. They could scrap their top-down reorganisation of the NHS. They could ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether he has any money left in the pocket where he found the bin money. This is not about arithmetic; it is about political will. It is about the Government saying, "We believe that this is something worth doing, and it is something to which we will commit ourselves."

Steve Webb: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Fiona O'Donnell: I will gladly give way to the Minister.

Steve Webb: I am very grateful. We let a lot of things past, but will the hon. Lady clarify one point? She mentioned—I think I quote her accurately—getting a million young people back to work through the future jobs fund. Can she tell the House how many permanent jobs young people actually got when Labour ran the future jobs fund?

Fiona O'Donnell *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. I think the hon. Lady knows—and the Minister certainly does—that the debate has nothing to do with the future jobs fund.

Fiona O'Donnell: Perhaps we can have that conversation another time. The point is that the Government do not have the political will to do something about this. In opening for the Opposition, my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East mentioned that it is not just the Prime Minister of this Government who does not "get" women; the whole team do not "get" women.

At Prime Minister's questions two weeks ago, I watched the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary gathering—almost dragging—women from their seats in order to create a female halo around the Prime Minister. He and his Government need to understand that the reason he is turning women off has nothing to do with stage management or presentation. The reason is the policies—such as the one we are discussing—which are adversely and unfairly impacting on women. I urge Liberal Democrat Members in particular, who have at times pushed the Government on this issue, to go the whole hog tonight and back the amendment.

When a Government consider an inequality impact assessment, that is not political correctness gone mad—it is not just something the previous Labour Government left for the current Government. Rather, it is about good government and good decision making, so that when a Government make a decision, they are in full possession of the facts about how that decision will impact on people.

Gordon Birtwistle (Burnley) (LD): I would have some sympathy for the hon. Lady's cause if she could explain where we might find the money to fund what she wants. *[Interruption.]* This is not about the future jobs fund. Will the hon. Lady tell us where the Labour party would find the cash?

Fiona O'Donnell: The hon. Gentleman should be extremely grateful to me for giving way, as he has not had the courtesy to be present for the entire debate. The fact is that when this Government want to find money, they can do so.

This decision betrays an appalling lack of ambition. I understand that the Government are not doing well in growing the economy, and they are probably a little disappointed in themselves—as, indeed, others are disappointed in them. Perhaps they have little faith in this country's ability to recover and come out of the recession, with people back in work and contributing to the state. However, none of that serves to explain why this group of 500,000 women have to pay the price. Why do they have to pay for the Government's plan to reduce debt?

For every one of those 500,000 women who will work for longer—300,000 of them for the full 18 months—there is a real story, such as that of a woman who works in the care service and who wrote to me. If she had known a few years ago that she was going to have to work extra time, she would have got out of the care sector while she could. She thinks she can struggle on until her retirement age as it stands now, but given the physical demands of her job, she does not think she can do another 18 months of lifting and handling.

Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) has left the Chamber. He talked about women retiring at 40 and 50 and living another 60 years of retirement. He is not talking about the women we are talking about. The women who need this money most are the women this Government are hurting most.

I urge Members to consider fairness, and to consider giving these women a fair chance. This is our one opportunity to stand up for those 500,000 women—the women who have been contacting us, appealing for justice. I hope we will all do the right thing tonight.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. A number of Members still want to speak, and the Minister also has to respond to the debate. I intend to call him at about 7.20 pm, and I ask Members to be brief so that everybody can contribute.

6.45 pm

Kate Green: As so much that I agree with and endorse has been said, I am sure I can be very brief.

That we have had any concessions at all from the Government today is a tribute to the many women who have contacted Members on both sides of the House. We are disappointed, however, as this is a half-baked measure. It is half-baked in two respects. It is half-baked as it deals with only part of the problem and only some of the women who are adversely affected, when, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Dame Anne Begg) said, we had an opportunity to solve this problem and move forward. It is also half-baked because it does not offer a holistic response to the situation these women face. Rather, it addresses only the question of when we might grudgingly start to hand them their state pension, and it does not deal at all with the other elements of public policy that will be needed to support those women if they are not going to be eligible for a state pension until later.

[Kate Green]

Especially as we know that women's private pension pots are significantly lower than men's, it is regrettable that we are seeking to delay their access to the state pension before the new auto-enrolment in the National Employment Savings Trust has been in place for long enough for them to have had the opportunity to begin to build up a private pension pot. If these women are expected to remain in the workplace for longer, it is regrettable that there are no signs that the Government's Work programme will be adapted to be better suited to helping older women find, or remain in, jobs. No thought has been given to how the Work programme will support those women.

I would be grateful if the Minister said what assessment has been made of the other financial benefits these women may have to rely on if they are not able to find paid work at the ages of 64, 65 or 66, and whether the cost the Government are talking about includes the additional level of those benefits. That is a particular concern because if women are using up their savings, they may have to draw further on the state when they reach retirement.

Other colleagues have pointed out that many older women provide child care for their children's children. Will those children in future have to access paid-for child care that the Government will in due course be subsidising through the tax credit or universal credit?

Also, what is the health strategy in relation to the health needs of these women? We know that women in their 60s are more likely than men to suffer from functional disabilities. Some 40% of women at age 60 have limitations in activities of daily living, and 20% have severe limitations. I have not heard that the Minister has given any thought to that, or had any discussions with colleagues in the Department of Health to ensure that we are also securing better health for those women if we expect them to remain in paid work for longer.

The key additional points I wanted to make were about the absence of a holistic response from the Government. They have hastily introduced a half-baked measure—and a fairly vicious measure for the many hundreds of thousands of women who are still being put in a situation in which their retirement is substantially delayed without their having the resources to carry themselves through to that point. I urge the Minister to think again.

Lilian Greenwood: The Minister may feel that he has heard my speech before, as we discussed his Government's plans to accelerate the rise in state pension age at some length in Committee. However, as he did not fully address the points I made then, I make no apology for making them again.

My constituent, Lorraine Smedley, e-mailed me on Friday asking if anything can be done even at this late stage. The answer must be yes. The Minister can still change his mind; he can accept our amendment that would ensure that no one would wait more than an extra 12 months to receive their pension. Also, if he chooses not to listen, Members on the Government Benches can still decide to join the Opposition in the Lobby tonight. I hope they will do so, although the contributions we have heard so far suggest that they will not.

Members who were not fortunate enough to serve on the Bill Committee will not know about my constituent Lorraine, so let me explain why she is so angry about the Government's plans. Lorraine worked for the national health service for many years, but, having put aside some savings, she decided to take a part-time job as she moved towards her expected retirement date. She had worked out that she could supplement her part-time wage until her retirement. She told me:

> "I thought I was close enough to my retirement age to know where I stood."

Even with the Government's welcome concession, Lorraine is still being asked to work for an extra 15 months, and she says she does not know what to do. Working those extra 15 months before she receives her state pension is not a prospect she relishes. Her job as a community care assistant is demanding, both physically and emotionally, and she is not sure that she will be able to continue; and with the cuts in public service spending and public sector jobs, she may not have a job anyway. The prospect of claiming benefits is anathema to Lorraine. She was determined to pay her own way her whole life, and having left school at 16 and paid into the state pension pot all those years she feels that she should not have to rely on benefits now.

Lorraine's case highlights the two reasons why the Government's proposals are unfair. First, they do not give women adequate notice of the change. The Minister has sprung these changes on women in their late 50s without giving them a realistic time scale in which to make preparations for the loss of pension payments that they have earned and expected over many years. In 1995, the then Government legislated for the equalisation of state pension ages. Women who were expecting to retire at 60 learned that they would have to wait until they were 65 to do so. They may not have liked it but they had many, many years to adjust. Yet that same group—those same women—who knew that they would have to work or wait for an extra five years for their pension, are now being asked to accept a further rise of more than a year with just five or seven years' notice of the change.

The second reason why the Government have got it wrong is that the changes lead to one group being asked to bear an unfair share of the burden. According to the Department's impact assessment, the proposals in the Bill affect about 5 million people—2.3 million men and 2.6 million women. About 4.5 million people will have their state pension age increased by a year or less, and their position is unaffected by the Minister's last-minute amendment. An estimated 500,000 people, all of them women born between 6 October 1953 and 5 October 1954, will still have their pension age increased by more than a year. Some 300,000 women will experience an increase of exactly 18 months. No man will have to wait more than 12 months extra to receive his pension. How is that fair?

I accept that there has been a significant upward revision in the life expectancy of those reaching 65 over the next decade and that those benefiting from increased longevity should share in the costs. As we live longer, we need to pay more towards our income in retirement and/or work longer. The women like Lorraine who have written to me do not disagree—they understand that they may need to work longer—but they think that they should pay a fair share. The Minister did not explain in Committee so I hope he will explain now how it is fair that those 500,000 women have to pay a bigger share than anyone else, particularly given that we also know that they, as a group, are not well-equipped to bear a greater share of that burden.

As my hon. Friends have set out, these women are less financially secure than men and are much more likely to be reliant on the state pension. If they do have savings for their pension, those are likely to be much less than those of men. These women are likely to have taken time out of the labour market to care for children, thus affecting their contributions record and their salary level. They are likely to have worked part-time and to have been excluded from an occupational pension scheme until the 1990s. The Department's own figures confirm this: the median pension savings of a 56-year-old woman are, as has been said, just £9,100, whereas the equivalent figure for men is £52,800, which is almost 600% higher.

Although, like Lorraine, I welcome the Minister's amendment, it just does not go far enough. Women should not bear an unfair burden, which is why I support the Labour amendments. They would mean that 1.2 million fewer people would have to work longer and would ensure that nobody would be asked to work more than 12 months extra to receive their pension.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): To be perfectly honest, it is disgraceful that the Government are not giving these women enough time to plan their retirement properly and it is clear that the changes that the Government are now proposing do not remedy the situation that they got themselves into with their initial proposals. It is wrong that women who have worked hard—doing all sorts of things, not necessarily paid work—for many years are now being denied their well-deserved pension for an extra 18 months with so little notice.

Nobody is denying the demands of longevity and the fact that we have to think ahead. However, we have to plan ahead properly and in a structured way. That is why in 2008 Labour legislated that the state pension age would become 66 by 2024 to 2026. That time scale was set out to give people 16 to 18 years in which to plan. As hon. Members will recall, the Turner report recommended a minimum of 15 years' notice for any changes in the pension age and that is a very important point to note. Obviously the Government have brought that forward significantly, leaving many women with very little time in which to plan for a delayed retirement. Some 500,000 women will have a delay of up to 18 months before they get their pensions and about 330,000 women will have a delay of a full 18 months. The Government are determined to introduce this change, despite the fact that before the election we were given promises by both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats that there would be no change before 2020.

The particular women that we are talking about are the most vulnerable. Those who depend most on the state pension are those who have the lowest incomes, those who have perhaps had the least opportunity to make contributions and those who have worked in the least well-paid jobs. As has been clearly expressed by my hon. Friends, women are far more reliant than men on the state pension because their pension pot is usually very small. Very often they have been limited in the opportunities they have had in this regard. They may have taken years out for child care, limited themselves in order to be able to pick up their children after school or limited themselves by geographical location. Often this group of people are enabling their own sons and daughters to work and have a decent income for their families by providing very valuable child care for the grandchildren. We often refer to these women as the "sandwich generation" because at the same time as they are looking after those grandchildren they are often coping with their own elderly parents.

Of course, these women are often more vulnerable to the cuts. An enormous number of cuts are being made in all sorts of jobs, in not only the public sector, but the private sector. The Government's growth strategy is clearly failing, and often it is not just the lack of public procurements, but the lowering of income levels in the whole of a region or town which is making it harder and harder even for private businesses to flourish. Women are often doing more casual work or are working part-time, and as they are the ones who have often come latest to the jobs they are often the ones facing redundancy. It is often extremely difficult for older women to find new posts, particularly in areas with geographical limitations or not very good bus services, and if they need to be back to collect the grandchildren from school.

A number of these women are widows. My right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) has clearly explained the demographics and set out the number of men in certain groups who die young. Some 19% of men in certain social categories die before the age of 65, many of whom leave widows and they, like other groups, are not best placed to face the difficulties of trying to keep house and home together in difficult financial circumstances. If they do not receive their pension until a certain age, they will be losing not only the state pension, but pension credit and the various concessions and entitlements that are limited to people of state pension age.

If there were a genuine growth strategy, the argument about freeing up jobs would not be valid, because as more jobs are generated people who stay in work longer have more money to spend and so it is easier to create more jobs that younger people can take up. When there is no economic growth and the spiral is downwards, there is more bed-blocking—or job-blocking—whereby older people staying in work makes it more difficult for youngsters to get started.

So although Labour Members welcome the fact that the Government have made something of a concession, we are very disappointed that it is only a half-measure. In fact, it is nothing but window dressing. It is the sort of Christmas present that is wrapping with absolutely nothing inside—an empty cardboard box with some paper round it. The correspondence that I have received indicates to me that my constituents are not fooled by it and are worried that they will still be facing much of the same difficulty as they were with the original proposals.

I shall support the amendments tabled by those on my Front Bench to ensure that we try to give the maximum number of women the maximum amount of benefit that we can, rather than the Government amendments, which are, quite frankly, laughable. They are a disgrace because they do not address the main thrust of the problem and they leave a lot of women with a large gap and very little time in which to work out how to deal with it.

7 pm

Sheila Gilmore: The concession made by the Government is, of course, a welcome one. The fact that we are saying that it is not enough does not mean that it is not welcome, but I do ask why they have taken so long to arrive at this point. On Second Reading, back in June, not a single Government Back Bencher spoke in favour of the Government's proposals on the acceleration in women's pension age. They were clearly unhappy but were prevailed on at the time, it would appear, to vote for Second Reading by being told that some form of transitional arrangement would be forthcoming.

Those of us who were privileged to serve in Committee asked for the transitional arrangements so that we could debate and scrutinise them, which is what a Committee ought to be about, but we were told that they were not ready because they would be very complicated. "By the way," said the Minister, "Where are your transitional proposals? Why have you not come up with any?" As a new Member, I thought that perhaps it was commonplace for the Opposition to be expected to come up with proposals for the Government because they have not thought them up yet—

Steve Webb: They are called amendments.

Sheila Gilmore: We had amendments. We tabled amendments that were not a million miles away from those that we are proposing today, because we felt that, in the circumstances, a proposal to cap the period of time for which women would have to endure this change was the best thing to do. Our amendments were not supported by either Government party in Committee, but we had clearly made proposals that ranked as transitional, because—lo and behold—four days before this final chance to debate the subject in the House, a proposal was made. It is not some complex transitional arrangement that would take civil servants hours, weeks or months to work out but fairly straightforward and involves capping the period of time. In my view, that proposal could have been made in Committee without any difficulty and it could also have been made at any time over the months that have passed since the Committee stage ended in July.

I suspect that one of the main reasons this rabbit has apparently been pulled out of the hat at the last minute is to prevent any great campaign being restarted for further change and to prevent people asking for more. Like Oliver—most of us nowadays, unlike the cruel people in Victorian workhouses, think that Oliver was right to ask for more—the women who have contacted my colleagues and me over the past few days are still asking for more because they feel that the Government's proposals remain unfair. They have alleviated the proposals for one group of women but not for all those who are affected and, in my view, those women are right to ask for more.

The Government have been extremely calculating. By not making their announcement until almost as late as possible while still making it in any way credible, they calculated that they would foreshorten the possibility that their Back Benchers might again be contacted by many of their constituents who would argue that the proposals are still not enough. The fact that they have given the shortest amount of time to this very successful campaign is clearly tactical.

In this debate, we always come back to the money question—it happened repeatedly in Committee and in many interventions on Opposition Members today. We are asked where we will get the money and told to come up with a specific statement about where we will find it. That happens not just as regards this proposal but day in, day out—*[Interruption.]* It is not unreasonable for us to say that we would not start from here. That is not unreasonable because we have a very different view about the choices and the fairness arguments that it is right to make and about how to progress our public finances over the next period.

Another argument that often comes up states that one cannot borrow one's way out of a crisis or out of debt. It seems we cannot cut our way out of a deficit either, or out of more debt, because public borrowing, far from having come down in the past year and a half, is rising. We would not start from here because our entire economic strategy would be different. Our view—as we said a year and a half ago and as it remains—is that to attempt to reduce the deficit within this Parliament was reckless, that it would not be successful and that it would risk higher unemployment and the stagnation of the economy. That is what is happening. If the economy continues to stagnate, tax revenues will fall with fewer people in work and fewer businesses thriving. Falling tax revenues are a big reason why we have a deficit in the first place. This is not simply about Government spending, as is sometimes suggested.

Tax revenues will fall and benefits payments and other outgoings will rise, and those are very important considerations. In saying that we would not start from here, it is perfectly reasonable for us to make it clear that we would not want to be in the position that the Government seem determined to drive us into.

Jim Shannon: Under the Labour proposals for auto-enrolment for pensions, protection was given, but under the coalition Government's proposals the same protection is not given as there are conditions and people fall outside them. Does the hon. Lady think that that is another example of the difference between the two sides? Labour gives the option of protection and the coalition does not.

Sheila Gilmore: That certainly is such an example. If we are to give people the opportunity of saving for their pensions into the future, it is important that we take seriously the proposals for auto-enrolment and NEST and build them up in a way to which everybody should give their full support. Although I am sure that the Government have not officially said that they are not giving them their full support, I was struck as I read an article in *The Sunday Times* a week last Sunday by a suggestion that the Government might be backing off on the speed of the introduction of auto-enrolment. That might have been a piece of kite-flying, as I gather it relates to a piece of work that is being done internally for the Government, which will not be published and which we cannot see, about how to make yet more savings and attempt to grow the economy, but nevertheless that story reached the newspapers. I am sure the Minister will tell us that we have nothing to fear when we reach the relevant part of the debate.

We are constantly asked where we would find the money and, interestingly, despite the comments that Government Members made from a sedentary position a few moments ago, when my hon. Friends the Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) and for East Lothian (Fiona O'Donnell) made suggestions, they were pooh-poohed.

Brandon Lewis: Does the hon. Lady accept that one reason why people were incredulous about some of the suggestions made earlier is that the £11 billion required by Labour is equivalent to the whole budget for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and roughly double that of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport?

Sheila Gilmore: We are talking about a spending period over 10 years, so it is not equivalent to the budget in a given year. Even in those terms, we are always making choices, and I will not accept lessons from a party with many members who are publicly saying that, as quickly as possible, they want to reduce or take away the 50% tax rate. That is something they are keen to do and that is their choice. They can make the case for it, but if they bring that proposal forward, I for one will certainly oppose it. That is another way of deciding how money is going to be spent and how money is going to be collected—and that is only one example.

In an earlier intervention, I mentioned the pension tax relief system, which gives a huge amount of money to people who already have a lot of money. If someone wants to save £100 into their pension pot and they are on 20% tax, in order to get £200 tax relief they have to find £800 from their pocket, but if someone is on 50% tax, they have to find only half the amount they want to save. That is unfair; it is a subsidy to those who already have a lot of income and assets. If at the end of this decade we are finding it difficult to make ends meet and we cannot help the group of women we are talking about, perhaps we should be thinking about that system.

The women who are affected by the measure will be making exactly those comparisons. They know that choices are made in politics and that choices are made by Governments, and they know that it is not impossible for the Government to change their mind on this proposal. They did not campaign for it during the election; indeed one of my hon. Friends has suggested that it was probably drawn up in a great hurry and seemed like a good wheeze at the time, but it puts a particular burden on a group of women many of whom cannot easily afford the changes. I want to emphasise, as several of my colleagues have done, that it should not be assumed that these women have a job and can just go on doing that job, or that they will still be in that job in three, four or five years' time.

Fiona O'Donnell: Does my hon. Friend agree that those 500,000 women will also be asking, "Why us? Why not the banks or the bankers?" Why are they being made to pay? This is not just a question of economics but a question of right and wrong—and this is clearly wrong.

Sheila Gilmore: I could not have put it better myself.

Another question that the Minister has to answer is whether the Government, in looking for the savings they plan to make by going down this road, have put into the mix the additional costs that might arise in relation to some of these women, some of whom will not be able to work and might claim benefits. Some might claim jobseeker's allowance for a period and others might claim employment and support allowance if they are in ill health, although some of them will find that those benefits are cut off very quickly in certain circumstances because of other Government proposals. They will then be thrown back to spending any savings they may have made towards retirement.

A woman in her 50s or early 60s who finds herself in that position may not be able to claim benefit for very long. If she has a partner or has savings of any sort she will not be eligible for the means-tested benefits that come in after six months in the case of JSA and that, under Government proposals, will be lost after a year even for people who are unfit to work and are in a work-related activity group. They will find themselves eating up—literally in some cases—their savings to make it through to their postponed retirement date. Of course, at that stage, those women will no doubt have to claim additional top-ups to help their financial situation. I would like to be satisfied that the Government have taken those costs into account. The women themselves will have to meet extra costs, and so will the Government. The proposal is ill-thought-out and there has been a lot of time to rethink it. Like all the women who have been campaigning on this, I am extremely disappointed that the Government are not prepared to support our amendment tonight.

7.15 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): This is an incredibly important stage of the Bill, about which I have received hundreds of e-mails. I am sure that Members of the House from across the political divide have received e-mails specifically concerning women aged 58 and 56. We have had a number of discussions about this matter, including a Westminster Hall debate at which the Minister was present.

I know that I may sound very boring if I repeat again the concerns of those women and of Opposition Members about why this particular provision should not go through. Everyone accepts that the state pension age needs to rise in order to pay for a more generous basic state pension. This principle underpinned Labour's Pensions Act 2007, which continued the 1995 timetable for equalising women's state pension age with men's by increasing it to 65 by 2020, and then legislated to increase both SPAs to 66 by 2027, to 67 by 2036 and to 68 by 2046. That was agreed and there was cross-party consensus on that.

The coalition agreement stated:

> "The parties agree to....hold a review to set the date at which the state pension age starts to rise to 66, although it will not be sooner than 2016 for man and 2020 for women."

However, the Bill proposes an acceleration in the equalisation for women by 2018 and increases both men's and women's state pension age to 66 by 2020. This will hit women aged between 56 and 58 particularly hard, as they will have very little time to prepare or amend their existing plans. As has been pointed out by my colleagues countless times, those women have worked very hard in their lives but often for not very high pay, so they will not be getting very generous pensions in any event, yet they are going to be hit even harder.

The proposal will affect 4.9 million people—2.6 million women and 2.3 million men. Some 500,000 women born between 6 October 1953 and 5 March 1955 will have their state pension age delayed by more than

[Yasmin Qureshi]

a year, and 300,000 women born between 6 December 1953 and 5 April 1954 will have theirs delayed by 18 months exactly. For the 300,000 women facing an 18-month delay, the loss of income will be around £7,500; for those in receipt of pension credit, the figure will be closer to £11,000. That sudden and dramatic change in women's expectations regarding their state pension age and retirement income comes with just five to seven years' notice, which simply is not long enough for them to make adequate alternative arrangements in their retirement planning.

Women are already at a disadvantage in terms of pension provision. The median pension saving of a 56-year-old woman is just £9,100, whereas the equivalent figure for men is £52,800—almost 600% higher. It is not fair to speed up the equalisation timetable because it will hurt women disproportionately, especially those aged between 56 and 58. I know that we hear about the financial constraints, but if the Government can find £3 billion for the completely unnecessary reorganisation of the national health service, which nobody wants—we have not heard any practitioners in the medical field say that those provisions are right—are they really saying that they cannot find a bit of money for women who have worked hard for so long in their lives? The proposal is measly penny-pinching. The Government are hurting the people who are already the poorest in our society and hitting them even harder. If money can be found for the wasteful reorganisation of the NHS, I am sure money can be found for the provision to be deleted.

I urge the Minister to reconsider this aspect of the Bill and think about those women, who have worked hard all their lives. He should think for once about ordinary working people who are looking forward to some kind of pension, although they will retire later than they thought they would, and he should give them time to prepare for their pensions.

Steve Webb: It is a pleasure to support Government amendments 13 and 14 and to ask the House to reject amendment 1.

I welcome the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) to his new role. With due deference to the good people of Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, I hope he will forgive me if henceforth I refer to him as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld—I hope they will not take offence at that. As he knows, his predecessor, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), to whom he referred in his speech, enjoyed a meteoric rise by shadowing me for 18 months. I hope to do the same for his career.

Before I move on to the amendments, I want to place on record my appreciation of one of the Department's officials, Evelyn Arnold, who has worked for the Department for 36 years. I know that the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) will have enjoyed working alongside her as well. She is stepping down from a legendary career. It is not often that we pay tribute on the record to the officials who make us sound far better informed than we otherwise would, so I would like to do that formally today.

We have heard £1 billion described today as "window dressing", "a bit of money" and "penny pinching". That summarises the difference between opposition and government. It reminds us how we came to find ourselves borrowing £150 billion a year when £11 billion, which is the cost of amendment 1, is regarded as small change and not worth worrying too much about. When pressed about where the £11 billion would come from, the Opposition said, in effect, "We'll find it at some point," but there was no specific answer.

It was revealing that the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore) said, "We keep being asked this question." They keep being asked the question because they keep making unfunded promises. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor pointed out that last week's Opposition amendment cost £20 billion. Today's would cost another £11 billion and, as the man once said, "Soon you're talking about serious money."

The Government amendments are, as the Chair of the Select Committee graciously said, a huge achievement, which is to say that at a time when the public finances are, if anything—because of the global economic situation—under even more pressure than they were at the time of Second Reading back in June, to identify £1 billion is an important sign of the Government's commitment to fairness in pension reform.

Sheila Gilmore: The Minister wants to make a great deal, and some of his supporters made a great deal, of having extracted that sum from the Treasury, but is he not again mistaking the position? He starts talking about the fact that we are apparently in a very difficult situation, worse than a year ago, and then says, "And we've managed to find a billion," but this is a long-term planning issue—it is not about what has happened in the past year.

Steve Webb: I notice that the hon. Lady dismisses the odd billion here or there again as of no great consequence. We have to make these decisions in the context of the real world. That is the difference between government and opposition. The hon. Member for East Lothian (Fiona O'Donnell), who spoke in the debate, said that it would take guts—that was the expression she used—to support an unfunded £11 billion promise, which the Opposition know they will never have to fund and would not implement if in government. That is a very odd definition of "guts".

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Is the Minister suggesting that the coalition agreement, which is fundamentally different from what is proposed in the Bill, was not made in the real world? That is what some of us suspect, but is he confirming it?

Steve Webb: As the hon. Lady knows, the coalition agreement referred to the possibility of raising the state pension age for men from 2016 and for women from 2020. Obviously, what we have done since that coalition agreement was produced is sought expert legal advice. We were advised that delaying the equalisation between men and women would have been illegal under European law. That comes to the heart of one of the questions that has rightly been asked, which is, why do the changes affect women more than men? The reason is that they are two separate changes brought together.

The first is the more rapid equalisation, and the second is the equal treatment of men and women from 65 to 66. The equal treatment of men and women from 65 to 66, not surprisingly, affects men and women equally, so the thing that affects women more is equalisation.

That is what the Pensions Act 1995 does. It leaves men's pension age at 65 and equalises women's pension age, raising it from 60 to 65. Lo and behold, that Bill affected only women, because equalising the pension age so that women get the pension at the same age as men rather than earlier affects women. Not surprisingly, a change that was happening in any case, which we have speeded up and which affects only women, added to a change that affects men and women equally, produces the expected result.

Hywel Williams: The Minister is making a reasonable case, as ever. I am rather more interested in his justification for the acceleration of the change. I hope that he will come to that shortly.

Steve Webb: Let me address that directly. What is striking as soon as one looks at the evidence on longevity is just how far behind the curve we are. When the male state pension age was set at 65, it was not so much a case of Lord Hutton writing reports on pensions as a case of Len Hutton striding out at the Oval. That was the era that we were talking about. In that almost 100 years, there have been incredible increases in life expectancy, yet the male state pension age will still be 65 for another seven years. That shows how far behind the curve we are.

The views of Lord Turner were cited by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and by others, with some suggestion that we are breaching the Turner consensus. However, Lord Turner has breached the Turner consensus, if I may say so. He said in a news interview a couple of years ago, and the world has moved on even since then:

> "If I was redoing my report I would be more radical, arguing for an even faster increase in the state pension age."

That is exactly what we are doing, in line with the Turner consensus.

Dr Whiteford: Does the Minister accept that although longevity has increased, healthy working life has not kept pace with longevity, and that there is a serious issue, especially for the particular group of women under discussion, many of whom will not be in the best of health in their late 50s and early 60s? That is one of the reasons why shifting the goalposts twice for this group of women is having such a disproportionate impact.

Steve Webb: The issue of health is certainly important. Almost all the figures that have been quoted through the debate assume that the women whose pension age is being delayed will have no money. If, as the hon. Lady rightly says, they are unable to work because of ill health and the household has no other resources, they will get a significant amount of that money through employment and support allowance and other benefits.

Clearly, there are differences between individual groups and, as the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) pointed out, between different parts of the country, but if we look at England, Wales and Scotland, for example, in terms of life expectancy at 65, in England for men since 1981 life expectancy has increased by seven years. In Wales for men it has increased by seven years, and in Scotland for men it has increased by seven years. For women, each of those figures is six years, respectively. So although there are differences, there have been substantial increases across the board.

Yes, there is big variation. I accept that point, but there have been increases across the board and we cannot say that because they have not happened for every individual in every part of the country and in every social group, we will do nothing. That is what got us into the present mess in the first place.

Kate Green: I note that the Minister acknowledges that for some women with no other source of income, instead of receiving their state pension they may for a time continue to receive out-of-work benefits. Can he address two points in relation to that? First, what do the Government estimate will be the cost of those women receiving such benefits for an extended period? Secondly, does he not understand that for women who are at that age and stage in their life, being expected to claim something called jobseeker's allowance is a tremendous insult or a tremendous concern because they know that they are not genuinely jobseekers? The labour market does not want or need them.

Steve Webb: On the hon. Lady's first point, we have of course taken account of the fact that there will be some women, and indeed some men, for whom the changes mean that instead of receiving a retirement pension, they receive jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance or another benefit. To give her an order of magnitude on that, without making allowance for that, the Bill would have saved around £33 billion. Taking account of that, we estimate a saving of around £30 billion, so getting on for 10% of the savings is lost through paying other benefits. That is entirely right and proper. In a way, her observation is backward-looking rather than forward-looking. We are moving to a world in which the idea of early retirement and drawing a pension at 60 years old or below, as in some public service schemes, is simply from another era, and the idea that someone should seek work, particularly if they are able-bodied, into their 60s is going to become entirely normal. The idea that it is somehow offensive to say that someone should look for work in their 60s is an idea from a bygone era; it is not the world that we are moving to.

7.30 pm

Malcolm Wicks: I am interested in the arithmetic that the Minister has just presented on how his savings have been adjusted, because some people will not be in work. Given that many people in the year or two before retirement are not in work, will he publish the detailed figures so that the House can scrutinise them?

Steve Webb: As a former Minister, the right hon. Gentleman will know that the figures were published with the Bill in May: they are from the impact assessment.

We have had a number of contributions, and in the short time available to me I shall refer to some of the points that have been made. As I have said, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld stated that his £11 billion should be spent and regarded it as a small sum, because he took the annual equivalent, divided that by the national debt and came up with a small fraction, as though somehow one can make £11 billion disappear. Well, the Labour party did make £11 billion disappear regularly, so he is keeping up that tradition, I suppose.

[Steve Webb]

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jenny Willott) asked where state pension reform fits into the measures before us, and I am pleased to tell her that we remain entirely committed to such reform, but one irony of all this is that the very group of women whom we are most concerned about, and whom we have heard most about in this debate, are probably the single group who will most benefit from our ideas on state pension reform.

In particular, many women who spent time bringing up children, before either home responsibilities protection came in or the state second pension introduced crediting, would benefit substantially from such reform. So, yes, their pension age will rise, but as our reforms take hold such women will benefit substantially, and my long-term commitment to pensions justice for women will be delivered. That is certainly my goal.

The right hon. Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) made the point that he has made before about differences in life expectancy and about people who leave school earlier, but his proposal for starting the national insurance clock running at different ages would create different anomalies. He says that somebody who leaves school and goes into a manual job could get their pension earlier, but someone who leaves school and goes to a desk job would also get their pension earlier, and people would then say, "Is that fair?" There are anomalies whichever way we do it.

The right hon. Gentleman did, however, raise the issue of people in the lowest socio-economic groups, but I remind him that over a 20-year period to 2002 men in the routine class, the lowest—as it were—socio-economic group, saw life expectancy at 65 years old increase by 2.5 years, and, given that the Bill increases the state pension age for men by only one year, the improvement in life expectancy for men, even in the group whom he is most concerned about, is running ahead of our proposed increase in the state pension age.

I repeat to the right hon. Gentleman that his points about the differences between groups are an argument for doing nothing. He supported the Pensions Act 2007, which will raise the state pension age to 68 years old, and we need to address health and occupational inequalities, rather than do nothing while we wait. That is the Opposition's counsel—let us wait another decade—but the trouble is that we have already waited a century to move the state pensions ages, so how long is long enough?

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) quite properly raised the important issue of notifying people of any changes, so I shall share with the House our plans. I very much welcome the fact that, subject to the House approving the Bill tonight and their lordships approving it in due course, we will be able to write directly to those affected to tell them exactly how they stand, thereby ending a period of uncertainty.

We will write to those women born between April and December 1953, just over 250,000 of them, early in the new year; to those born between December 1953 and April 1954, another 250,000 people, in February; and to another 250,000, born between April 1954 and April 1955, in March. The last group covers all women who would have been affected by the original equalisation timetable.

Fiona O'Donnell: Will the Minister also advise those women of their right to employment and support allowance? Will he confirm that, if they claim ESA, are turned down, wait seven months—as some have in my constituency—for an appeal, and that period crosses over their entitlement date to the state pension, their appeal will still be heard and any benefits backdated?

Steve Webb: Perhaps the hon. Lady does not understand what I am saying. I am talking about people who will reach state pension age in seven or eight years' time, so I am not sure that writing a letter, stating, "In the event you are on a certain benefit in seven or eight years' time, and the delay in tribunals in such and such," is germane to my point.

The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Dame Anne Begg), in a characteristically balanced contribution—*[Interruption]*—I spotted the balance even if nobody else did. She described the changes we are making today as a huge achievement, then said, "Well why don't we go the whole hog," but there are 11.1 billion reasons why we are not going to go the whole hog, and I am sure she understands that point.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East said, "Well, I wouldn't start from here"—and so say all of us. I do not think that any one of us would have chosen to inherit an annual deficit of £150 billion that had to be cleared up—*[Interruption.]* Members say from a sedentary position, "This isn't about the deficit," but a sequence of deficits creates a debt, which will be £1.4 trillion at the end of this Parliament, and that is both a capital sum and the interest that our children and grandchildren will have to pay, so we should take responsibility for it and tackle it.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said that the Work programme does not do anything for older women, but its beauty is that providers do not get paid unless they tailor what they do to the individual in front of them. For example, we find that the biggest barrier for many potential older workers is IT skills; they are entirely job-ready but not necessarily up to speed with technology. So, if that is the barrier, the Work programme provider does not need to come to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for approval, as in the old days, asking whether it is on a departmental checklist; they just get on with it, help the person obtain the skills and are rewarded only if they get that individual a job.

Kate Green: I understand how the Work programme proposes to reward providers, but does the Minister not accept that older women are particularly disadvantaged when seeking to access the labour market? Can he tell us, therefore, whether there will be an incentive payment to such providers in dealing with those older women?

Steve Webb: The incentive is clear: the providers do not get any money at all unless they help someone into work.

The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) mentioned grandparents: women in the age group under discussion who by taking care of grandchildren enable their sons and daughters to work. That is an important point, and that is why I was pleased to carry through in office proposals that had previously been brought forward on national insurance credits for grandparents—when their daughters are not using them—to ensure that their state pension rights do not suffer.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East asked why we did not do all that earlier and referred to Second Reading, but I remind her that in that debate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that the basic principle of the Bill is right—that we move to equality sooner and to aged 66 in 2020. We have been entirely consistent with what he said, but he also said that we need to make sure that the transition is fair and that those most adversely affected are helped. That is exactly what we deliver on today with the amendments.

We have identified, notwithstanding the difficult fiscal position, £1.1 billion to ensure that half a million people face a shorter increase in their pension age, and that a quarter of a million women who could have faced up to 24 months will now face a maximum of 18 months. It is worth keeping in context the fact that nine out of 10 people affected by the Bill will see an increase of one year or less in their state pension age.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who spoke last, said, "Well, it's only a bit of money," and, "It's penny pinching," and all I can say is that many people think that £1.1 billion is a lot of money. I know that it is a naïve observation, but I am in that category as well.

It was important to allocate to this issue a large amount of time for debate today, but we have simply had a repeat of what we heard in Committee: "Find £10 billion or £11 billion—it'll come from somewhere, it's not really a lot of money." From the Government, however, we have seen a serious balance struck between introducing the fiscal responsibility that was all too often lacking under the previous Government and listening and responding to the needs of those most affected by the Bill—and I commend our amendments to the House.

Gregg McClymont: This been a very important debate. I thank the Minister for his reply, but he has not satisfactorily answered the question repeatedly asked by Labour Members, which is fairly straightforward. Why are these 500,000 women paying a disproportionate price? Why are they having disproportionately to carry the burden?

Our amendments, if accepted, would mean that not one of the half a million women affected by this Bill would have to wait more than an extra year for their state pension, and, importantly, that they would have at least nine years' notice of the rise in their state pension age. At the same time, the state pension age of 66 for men and women would be brought forward to 2022. That would be a fair package, and it would keep the Government to the promise made in the coalition agreement. I should like to withdraw amendment 1 and test the will of the House on amendment 3.

Amendment, by leave withdrawn.

Amendment proposed: 3, page 1, line 8, leave out subsection (4).—*(Gregg McClymont.)*

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 244, Noes 291.

Division No. 367] **[7.41 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bain, Mr William
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barron, rh Mr Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Dame Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Blunkett, rh Mr David
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Brown, Mr Russell
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Campbell, Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Mrs Jenny
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curran, Margaret
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
Darling, rh Mr Alistair
David, Mr Wayne
Davidson, Mr Ian
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Dobbin, Jim
Docherty, Thomas
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donohoe, Mr Brian H.
Doran, Mr Frank
Dowd, Jim
Doyle, Gemma
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Engel, Natascha
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gilmore, Sheila
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mrs Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Greatrex, Tom
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr Peter
Hamilton, Mr David
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr Tom
Havard, Mr Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heyes, David
Hillier, Meg
Hilling, Julie
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr Jim
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs Siân C.
Jamieson, Cathy
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, rh Sadiq
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leslie, Chris
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, rh Mr Elfyn

Long, Naomi
Love, Mr Andrew
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
MacShane, rh Mr Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marsden, Mr Gordon
McCabe, Steve
McCann, Mr Michael
McCarthy, Kerry
McClymont, Gregg
McCrea, Dr William
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs Anne
McKechin, Ann
McKenzie, Mr Iain
McKinnell, Catherine
Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Morden, Jessica
Morrice, Graeme *(Livingston)*
Morris, Grahame M. *(Easington)*
Mudie, Mr George
Munn, Meg
Murphy, rh Mr Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
O'Donnell, Fiona
Onwurah, Chi
Osborne, Sandra
Paisley, Ian
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Raynsford, rh Mr Nick
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Riordan, Mrs Linda
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Roy, Mr Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Sarwar, Anas
Seabeck, Alison
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Shuker, Gavin
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Mr Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Straw, rh Mr Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walley, Joan
Watson, Mr Tom
Watts, Mr Dave
Weir, Mr Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Woodward, rh Mr Shaun
Wright, David
Wright, Mr Iain

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lyn Brown and
Phil Wilson

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Mr David
Andrew, Stuart
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Norman
Baker, Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Bingham, Andrew
Binley, Mr Brian
Birtwistle, Gordon
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Mr Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brake, rh Tom
Bray, Angie
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brooke, Annette
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Mr Robert
Burley, Mr Aidan
Burns, Conor
Burrowes, Mr David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Byles, Dan
Cable, rh Vince
Cairns, Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cash, Mr William
Chope, Mr Christopher
Clappison, Mr James
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colvile, Oliver
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crockart, Mike
Davey, Mr Edward
Davies, David T. C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dorrell, rh Mr Stephen
Dorries, Nadine
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Jonathan
Evennett, Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farron, Tim
Foster, rh Mr Don
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fullbrook, Lorraine
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Mr Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gilbert, Stephen
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, Robert
Hames, Duncan
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Matthew
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, Mr John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Mr David
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hemming, John
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoban, Mr Mark
Hollingbery, George
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Horwood, Martin
Howell, John
Hughes, rh Simon
Huhne, rh Chris
Hunter, Mark
Huppert, Dr Julian
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, Sajid
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kelly, Chris
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Mr Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Laws, rh Mr David
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Jessica
Leech, Mr John
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Mr Edward
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lumley, Karen
Main, Mrs Anne
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick

McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Esther
Mensch, Louise
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Patrick
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Anne
Moore, rh Michael
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Mosley, Stephen
Mowat, David
Mulholland, Greg
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr Brooks
Newton, Sarah
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Ollerenshaw, Eric
Opperman, Guy
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, rh Mr James
Parish, Neil
Patel, Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Pickles, rh Mr Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Raab, Mr Dominic
Randall, rh Mr John
Reckless, Mark
Redwood, rh Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Jacob
Reevell, Simon
Reid, Mr Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, rh Mr Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Amber
Ruffley, Mr David
Russell, Bob
Rutley, David
Sanders, Mr Adrian
Sandys, Laura
Scott, Mr Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Shepherd, Mr Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Miss Chloe
Smith, Henry
Soames, rh Nicholas
Soubry, Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mr Mark
Stanley, rh Sir John
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Mr Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sturdy, Julian
Swales, Ian
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Timpson, Mr Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Uppal, Paul
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Ward, Mr David
Watkinson, Angela
Weatherley, Mike
Webb, Steve
Wharton, James
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, rh Mr David
Williams, Mr Mark
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williamson, Gavin
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wright, Jeremy
Wright, Simon
Young, rh Sir George
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Norman Lamb and
Stephen Crabb

Question accordingly negatived.

7.56 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Amendments made: 13, page 2, leave out lines 14 to 18 and insert—

'6th January 1954 to 5th February 1954	6th May 2019
6th February 1954 to 5th March 1954	6th July 2019
6th March 1954 to 5th April 1954	6th September 2019
6th April 1954 to 5th May 1954	6th November 2019
6th May 1954 to 5th June 1954	6th January 2020
6th June 1954 to 5th July 1954	6th March 2020
6th July 1954 to 5th August 1954	6th May 2020
6th August 1954 to 5th September 1954	6th July 2020
6th September 1954 to 5th October 1954	6th September 2020"'.

Amendment 14, page 2, line 19, leave out '"1960" substitute "1954"' and insert '"5th April 1960" substitute "5th October 1954"'.—*(Steve Webb.)*

New Clause 2

Qualifying schemes: administration charges

'(1) Section 16 of the 2008 Act (qualifying schemes) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (3) for paragraph (a) substitute—

"(a) administration charges due from J while J is an active member exceed a prescribed amount,

(aa) administration charges due from former active members while J is an active member exceed a prescribed amount,

() while J is an active member, the scheme contains provision under which administration charges that will be due from J when J is no longer an active member will exceed a prescribed amount, or will do so in particular circumstances,".

(3) After that subsection insert—

"(4) For the purposes of subsection (3) administration charges are due from a person to the extent that—

(a) any payments made to the scheme by, or on behalf or in respect of, the person,

(b) any income or capital gain arising from the investment of such payments, or

(c) the value of the person's rights under the scheme,

may be used to defray the administrative expenses of the scheme, to pay commission or in any other way that does not result in the provision of pension benefits for or in respect of members.

(5) In subsection (3)(aa) "former active member" means a person who at some time after the automatic enrolment date was both a jobholder and an active member but is no longer an active member."'.—*(Steve Webb.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Steve Webb: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 1—*Obligation to inform scheme members about provider and product options*—

'Providers of Qualifying Schemes under section 16 of the Pensions Act 2008 (c.30) must, when informing members of their own range of annuity and similar products, explain clearly that alternative and more suitable options from other providers may be available.'.

[Mr Deputy Speaker]

New clause 9—*Duty to establish a review into transfers into the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST)*—

'Within two years of the passing of this Act the Secretary of State shall establish a review into allowing transfers into the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST).'.

New clause 10—*Duty to review any order on contribution limits in the National Employment Savings Trust*—

'In section 70 of the 2008 Act (Contribution Limits) at the end of subsection (1) insert—

'(1A) Any order under this section shall be reviewed by the Secretary of State within two years of the Pension Scheme being opened to members.'.

Amendment 18, in clause 6, page 6, line 37, leave out 'three' and insert 'one'.

Amendment 19, in clause 8, page 8, line 1, at beginning insert 'Subject to subsection (2A),'.

Amendment 20, page 8, line 4, at end insert—

'(2A) An order made under subsection (2) must not increase the amount in section 3(1)(c) by more than—

(a) the general level of earning; or

(b) in percentage terms by more than the percentage increase in the Lower Earnings Limit for national insurance purposes.'.

Government amendments 15 and 16.

Steve Webb: This is a broad group of proposals relating to private pensions. I shall speak in support of Government new clause 2 and Government amendments 15 and 16. As we have a relatively short time to discuss these issues I will also deal with the other amendments in the group, and do not anticipate making a further contribution to the debate.

Government new clause 2 deals with charges. Obviously, charges are important, as I am sure the whole House will agree, because money that goes on charges does not turn into pensions. The Government are therefore keen to ensure that charges are at a reasonable level and are transparent. For example, following on from the policies of the previous Government, we have gone ahead with the introduction of the National Employment Savings Trust, which will be a low-cost provider designed to ensure that charges across the market are brought down. There is evidence that new entrants to the market and existing providers are already looking at charges significantly lower than many people have experienced on their pensions in the past.

In Committee, concerns were raised about whether the Government should be capping charges. As the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who is responding for the Opposition, is well aware, the Government do have powers to cap certain pension scheme charges. In considering this issue, we became aware of the anomaly that we do not have that power in relation to people who are no longer active members of pension schemes but who are deferred members, and in particular deferred members of qualifying schemes for auto-enrolment. If we want to cap charges—I will come back to that issue in a second—we do not currently have the power in primary legislation to cap them for deferred members of qualifying schemes for auto-enrolment. The purpose of Government new clause 2 is to give us that power, so that if we want to impose charge caps, we can do so systematically and without unintended omissions.

Our thinking on charge caps is that in general, we do not believe there will be a problem with charges. Particularly in the early years of auto-enrolment, it will be the very largest firms that come into the system. They will have the resources and time to shop around, they will be able to strike good deals, and they will have the National Employment Savings Trust available to them. We expect that for big and medium-sized firms, relatively low charges will be the norm.

8 pm

However, concern has been expressed about the fact that it will be not the individual pension policyholder but the employer who will choose the provider. That may be a small firm that has little interest in the scheme and is choosing a provider because it has to, rather than because it has an active interest in pensions. It therefore may not put the time and effort required into shopping around, and it may choose a high-cost provider. The members of the scheme, who may not pay much attention to its fine print, may find themselves with above-average charges. If that were to become a problem, we would want the power to do something about it, particularly in the case of deferred members. Once someone has ceased contributing to the scheme or working for the firm, they have even less connection with the scheme and even more vulnerability.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Why have the Government decided to raise the level at which auto-enrolment will come in? By their own figures, that will affect about 600,000 people, mainly women.

Steve Webb: I will come on to that, because Opposition amendments 19 and 20 relate to it. As I said in my introduction, I shall deal with all the amendments in this group, so if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me I will explain our thinking on that matter later.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The Minister has referred to the transparency of the current charges in the pensions industry, yet in his evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, the gentleman who advised the Government on the matter—I regret that I have forgotten his name—made the point, which I am sure everybody in the House would endorse, that existing pensions provision is extremely cloudy. It is extremely difficult to know what the charges are, because the wording is imponderable in many instances. Why is the Minister so sanguine about what will happen in future? It certainly has not happened in the past, and it certainly is not happening now.

Steve Webb: There are two significant differences between past and future provision. First, we have established NEST, which did not exist before. It has been set up as a low-cost provider, so we have guaranteed that there is such a provider out there, particularly for small firms, which are the least likely to shop around. Secondly, there is a saying that pensions are not bought, they are sold. In other words, individuals tend not to go out and look for a pension but instead have one sold to them. In a world of auto-enrolment, the opposite is the case. Employers have a legal duty to select a provider, and that makes providers' costs much lower. Rather than having to bear the huge costs of individual salespeople going out and selling to individual policyholders, employers will instead seek out providers. The costs of the whole process will be much lower, so that will be a significant step in the right direction.

Glenda Jackson: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Webb: I will not, if the hon. Lady will forgive me, because I am going to try to cover about six topics in not very much time, so as to give everyone else a chance to respond.

Government new clause 2 has been tabled in response to our discussions in Committee, and will give the Government a power that I think previous Governments either thought they had or would have wanted to have. It is the power to cap charges for deferred members of qualifying auto-enrolment schemes. I think that is probably a relatively uncontentious power. Were we to bring it into force, that would clearly be the subject of separate debates and discussion in the House, but I hope the House will be happy that the Government should have that power.

Government amendments 15 and 16 are technical amendments to clause 14, dealing with what would otherwise have been a problem in section 30 of the Pensions Act 2008. Although that section currently allows employers to use a defined benefit, hybrid or money purchase scheme as an alternative scheme, it does not allow them to use a workplace personal pension scheme. Clause 14 corrects that omission, but there is a risk that an individual might be automatically enrolled into a personal pension scheme, and then required to pay contributions immediately for up to four previous years. The amendments protect individuals from that scenario. They correct what we believe to be an error in previous legislation. I hope that the House will find my explanation helpful, although I can go into far greater detail if threatened.

I welcome new clause 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), who serves on the Work and Pensions Committee. I believe that, in a rather intimidating fashion, it has been signed by pretty much all the Committee's members, so I think I have to give it a fair wind. It is about what is known in jargon as the "open market option"—in other words, the fact that people often forget that when they save for a pension, they are doing two things. First, they are building up a pot of money—the accumulation stage—and then they are turning it into a pension, which is the "decumulation" stage. Those are two entirely separate processes.

All too often, someone can save with provider A—I will not use the name of a company—and think that they have to take their pension from provider A, which they do not. Broadly speaking, as a rule of thumb, it is estimated that the market can be divided into thirds. Roughly a third of people shop around and go somewhere else, a third of people shop around and stay with their original provider, and a third of people do not shop around at all. There is clearly a danger that at the crucial point when somebody sets their income for the rest of their life, they may not be getting the best value. The open market option reminds people that they can shop around, and indeed prompts them to do so. However, as I have just indicated, take-up of that option is not as high as we would wish, or as I believe the insurance industry would increasingly wish, so we need to do more.

I take new clause 1 as a probing amendment, and it is important in getting the issue on the table. As drafted, it would have one or two problems. It would bring some schemes within its scope that should not be, such as final salary schemes. Those are qualifying schemes for auto-enrolment, but we do not want to give final salary scheme providers a duty to tell people about their right to buy an annuity. That would not be appropriate. The new clause also duplicates some existing duties. For example, the Occupational Pension Schemes (Disclosure of Information) Regulations 1996, as I am sure my hon. Friend is well aware, state that when members have the opportunity to select an annuity, they must be informed of their right to buy one on the open market. They must also be advised that there are different types of annuities available, which may have different features and different payment rates. There are also 1987 regulations that relate to contract-based business. So there are rules about the open market option, but I think we would all agree that they are not working as well as they should. I am sure that is the point of my hon. Friend's new clause.

The Government welcome the opportunity to discuss the open market option. We believe that it is critical for consumers to think about the shape of annuity that is most appropriate to their circumstances and compare rates across providers. There are comparison websites available, which is a helpful development, but people have to know about them to look at them. They have to consider the option in order to know what questions to ask.

I am pleased to say that, in an example of joined-up government, we are working closely with our colleagues at the Treasury on the matter. I regularly meet my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary, who leads on it, to discuss the open market option, and we have a joint working group examining that very issue. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire will be pleased to know that earlier this year, we asked that working group to consider what is called a default open market option arrangement—in other words, whether we could make shopping around the default, so that people would have to make an active choice to stay with their current provider. There are practical issues to consider, such as what would happen to someone who failed to shop around, whether there should be a point at which their own provider paid them a pension, and what information people should have. However, the principle is attractive, and certainly my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary is keen to go as far as we can.

Progress has already been made. One might say that a working group is often the last refuge of a scoundrel—not the Financial Secretary, I should add; I meant myself. However, this is a working group with teeth. To give one example, the Association of British Insurers, which has engaged actively with us on the matter, has already said that its members will cease sending out to people, with the letter saying that they can get an annuity, the application form from their own provider. They will stop saying, "You can shop around, but here in the same envelope is a form to get an annuity from us." Instead, a person will actively have to say, "I want my annuity from you; give me a form." That is a small step in the right direction, but I believe we need to go further.

I will be pleased to hear the arguments and concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire, but we are certainly seized of the importance of this

[Steve Webb]

issue. We do not believe the new clause is quite the way to deliver what is needed, but the Government very much welcome it, and the spirit of what she is trying to achieve.

Glenda Jackson: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Webb: On that point?

Glenda Jackson: Yes.

Steve Webb: Okay.

Glenda Jackson: I am extremely grateful that the Minister welcomes new clause 1, but with all due respect, he spoke earlier of pensions being not bought, but sold. He is now talking about the buyer being in the driving seat, but as we know full well, and as we see in the papers every day in relation to energy prices, people do not seem to have the capacity to shop around in their best interests. I do not think that the Government have had a great deal of success in encouraging companies to make the situation better. Will he learn from those mistakes, and will there be a better method?

Steve Webb: As I think I said a moment ago, we have asked the working group to look at making shopping around—*[Interruption.]* Before the hon. Lady heckles me, she might like to listen.

Glenda Jackson: I was muttering, not heckling.

Steve Webb: The working group will look at making shopping around the default situation. Somebody who does not actively choose to stay with their current provider will shop around by default. That is the difference between pensions and energy suppliers. Whereas people are stuck with their energy suppliers unless they choose to shop around, people will not get a pension unless they shop around. That is a pretty good incentive to shop around.

Glenda Jackson: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Webb: I hope that the hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not; I have given way to her twice already.

New clauses 9 and 10 relate to the role of NEST, which I mentioned a moment ago. New clause 9 suggests that in a couple of years' time we should review transfers into NEST, and new clause 10 suggests that we review contribution limits at the same time. It is worth reminding the House why NEST was constrained when it was established. There was a recognition that there is a market for big firms and higher earners—pension providers are willing to provide at a reasonable cost and to go to such firms. However, for small firms and lower-paid workers, there was a market failure. NEST was designed to fill that gap in the market.

First, the Government created a legal duty for firms to enrol people, so we ensured that there was something to enrol people in. That is what NEST is for. Secondly, we could have created NEST and imposed no constraints, and it could have been just another provider, but because we constrained NEST to consider lower-paid workers and smaller firms, it has innovated in an impressive manner. The previous Government envisaged such constraints. The Work and Pensions Committee has visited NEST and was positive about what it found. Forcing NEST to focus on lower-paid workers, smaller firms, and people who do not speak "pensions" or who are uninterested in them, has created impressive product, investment strategy and technological innovation, which is entirely welcome. Creating NEST with constraints was the right thing to do, and it has been beneficial.

Dame Anne Begg: If NEST is to work, people must have confidence in the products that are going to be delivered. However, there is a danger that other providers muddy the waters of what is on offer. For instance, a Federation of Small Businesses booklet says that it will offer a comparable pension provider with which firms can auto-enrol their workers. The charge is 0.75% to FSB members and 1% to non-members, but they are not comparable prices. What can the Minister do to ensure that such misinformation does not divert people away from NEST?

Steve Webb: I am grateful to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee for drawing my attention to that document, and I am keen to see a copy. Pensions selling is, broadly speaking, regulated by the Financial Services Authority. Claims about pensions need to be accurate. NEST charges are the equivalent—on an average pension—of around 0.5%, as the hon. Lady knows. The suggestion is that a charge of 0.75% or 1% is "comparable". We can compare anything with anything, but the comparison is not always favourable. She raises an important point, and the pensions regulator and the FSA will seek to ensure that people are given accurate information about pensions.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who speaks for the Opposition, will be well aware that the Government already have a duty to review NEST after the five-year roll-out of auto-enrolment. New clauses 9 and 10 would not repeal the other duty, so they would mean a review in two years and another one three years after that. The earlier review would be premature and unhelpful in the middle of the roll-out. One might want to tweak 1,001 things, but a review in the middle of roll-out would create uncertainty when the next tranche of firms is choosing which provider to go for. Will NEST have its limit lifted? Will the transfer ban go? Those questions would mean yet more turmoil. An element of certainty in the auto-enrolment process, which has been iterated quite a lot, would be welcome.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Government had our own review—"Making automatic enrolment work"—last summer. It said that in the end, in 2017, the restrictions should go. I am entirely sympathetic to that proposition, but deciding that today, or reviewing the situation in the middle of the roll-out, is not the best way forward.

8.15 pm

Finally, I shall make some observations on waiting periods and the earnings trigger for auto-enrolment. Just to be clear, the Bill introduces a voluntary waiting period of 13 weeks. The previous Government's legislation proposed that people had to be auto-enrolled on the day they started. That might not coincide with an employer's pay period, and it might require very large numbers of employees to be enrolled on a single day. That was the legislation that we inherited.

The Bill creates a 13-week waiting period. Somebody who values their pension rights can still opt in, but the Government listened very carefully to the concerns of smaller businesses. Their judgment was that requiring them to enrol people on day one was a considerable burden. The flexibility of a three-month period strikes a balance. We were being lobbied to specify six months and to exclude small firms altogether, but we judged that a three-month period strikes the right balance.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): May I ask the Minister a wider question on auto-enrolment? As he will know because it has been widely reported in the past few days, a report from Mr Adrian Beecroft recommends that the Government postpone the implementation of auto-enrolment altogether. Has the Minister seen that report? If so, what is his response to it?

Steve Webb: The right hon. Gentleman is right that a draft report has been produced and reported in the press, but I can assure him that—as we once famously pointed out—2012 will definitely happen next year. In other words, we do not believe that this important programme should be delayed. Interestingly, the CBI does not believe in a delay, either. It recognises that the biggest firms, which will come in next year, are already planning. In many cases they have already chosen their providers. They are getting on with it, and the last thing we need is new uncertainty about the start of auto-enrolment. We will, therefore, be pressing ahead.

Waiting periods are clearly a trade-off, but today more than ever, we need to realise the impact of what we are doing on smaller firms and businesses more generally.

Mrs Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I understand the Minister's point and the benefits to a payroll department in a small firm, but does he accept that people who change jobs frequently throughout their careers could be disadvantaged? If people change jobs 11 times, they could end up losing about three years' worth of benefits.

Steve Webb: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. That is one of the arguments against a six-month waiting period, but those things are a matter of judgment. She used an interesting phrase when she mentioned the payroll departments of small firms, but of course a typical small firm does not have a payroll department, and will struggle with those provisions. We are trying to ensure that the scheme has flexibility, so that we take small firms with us rather than have them resenting the scheme. The waiting period is important in that respect.

Finally, on amendments 19 and 20 and the earnings trigger, which the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) mentioned, the Bill originally proposed that we auto-enrol at around about the national insurance floor, which is a bit more than £5,000, uprated in today's prices. There were two problems with that. First, there was no de minimis provision, so employers would have auto-enrolled people for pennies a week. If the floor were £5,000 and a person earned £100 a week—£5,200 a year—they would be enrolled on the £200 above the £5,000. Under the legislation that we inherited, the contribution at the start would be 1%—£2 a year, or 4p a week. There might have been the odd adverse newspaper story had we required small firms to enrol people for 4p a week, so we took the view that we had to put the threshold up.

The obvious threshold to use—common thresholds are attractive to employers—is the PAYE threshold. Although we will look at the prevailing situation and make a judgment each year, the broad idea behind aligning with the PAYE threshold is that if businesses have to run PAYE for somebody, auto-enrolment will be a reasonable duty. Below that level, it is inappropriate.

Kevin Brennan: Further to that point, if the Government raise the PAYE threshold, as they have previously announced, will auto-enrolment be triggered at that higher threshold? Would not that deny millions of people—those who would benefit the most—the benefits of auto-enrolment?

Steve Webb: As we have made clear, people still have the right to opt in to auto-enrolment, but obviously the bulk duty will be at the tax threshold. There is a trade-off: we can have a low threshold, but that results in people being brought in for what are technically known as piddling amounts of money, for which the costs are disproportionate. The tax threshold appears to us to be broadly the right level, but as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have discretion in the Bill to look each year at the labour market and at what has happened to earnings and prices, and to make a judgment. That is the broad direction of travel, as recommended to us—

Dame Anne Begg: The concern that some of us have is not that the tax threshold will go up to £10,000—although that is the avowed intention of the Government—but that the gap between £7,400 and £10,000 is about £2,500. That group of workers earning under £10,000 might be ruled out of auto-enrolment, when they are the very people who should be auto-enrolled. The situation would be different if the threshold were going up by the rate of inflation, but can the Minister give some assurance that if there is such a leap, he will reconsider the threshold?

Steve Webb: It will clearly vary from individual to individual, but for many people, earning £8,000 or £9,000 is a transitory phase in their labour market experience, and they will move on to earn more than the tax threshold and so come within the scope of the provision. So even if the threshold is not raised, it will not make a lot of difference if someone is not in the scheme for that year. For some people, they or their household will already have pension rights accrued and it might even be right for them to opt out. People will have the chance to opt in to pension provision if it is particularly important for them, and it is right that they should. I accept that there are issues for that group, but for any line drawn one can ask, "What about the people just below?" If we enrol people for trivial amounts of money, we will undermine the whole credibility of the scheme.

We have now had a whistle-stop tour through half a dozen private pensions issues, and I look forward to hearing hon. Members' comments. I commend new clause 2 to the House.

Stephen Timms: I welcome new clause 2, but I speak in favour of new clauses 9 and 10, and amendments 18, 19 and 20. I shall also respond to some of the points that the Minister has just made. I shall begin by endorsing the tribute the Minister paid to Evelyn Arnold, who is retiring from his Department this week. I very much valued her advice and the way in which it was delivered.

I welcome the fact that the Government have maintained the all-party consensus on the principle of auto-enrolment, based on the work of Lord Turner's commission on behalf of the previous Government. I worked closely with Adair Turner in that period, and I pay tribute to him, and to his fellow commissioners—Jeannie Drake, now Baroness Drake of Shene in the other place, and John Hills—for their very important achievement in the commission's report.

I say "all-party consensus" about auto-enrolment, but—as I suggested in my recent intervention—there has been some discussion in the last few days about the extent of that consensus. I notice that David Prosser, who knows something about all this, wrote in *The Independent* on Saturday:

> "There is a growing fear that the Government is about to announce a postponement of auto-enrolment…every delay in pension reform will mean a more miserable old age for millions."

I am glad, therefore, that the Minister has reaffirmed that the Government intend to go ahead with auto-enrolment on the timetable that has been announced.

It has been reported that Adrian Beecroft, who has given more than £500,000 to the Conservative party in the past five years and has, coincidentally, been asked to advise the Government on cutting burdens on business, has recommended in an interim report that auto-enrolment should be put on hold and scrapped entirely for small businesses.

No doubt there has been some lively discussion within the coalition about this issue, and it is encouraging to see the Secretary of State in his place on the Front Bench and agreeing with the Minister. The *Financial Times* quotes a Liberal Democrat official this morning as saying of Mr Beecroft:

> "He is an ideological Tory donor recruited to give voice to deeply held prejudices in the Tory party. His report has no evidence base."

I also noticed that the Liberal Democrat Equalities Minister told *The Observer* on Sunday that Mr Beecroft's ideas would be "swept away". We perhaps heard some sweeping away from the Minister this evening. I am pleased to hear his confirmation—endorsed by the Secretary of State—that there will be no delay in auto-enrolment and that small businesses will not be missed out.

I welcome, therefore, the maintaining of the previous consensus on auto-enrolment, and I hope that the position that Ministers have put to the House this evening will stand. However, I regret the dilution of the previous proposals in the Bill. Our amendments seek to address the watering down of the principle of auto-enrolment that the Government have proposed. The amendments would reduce the proposed three-month waiting period to one month. They would also limit increases to the earnings trigger for auto-enrolment to no more than the increase in either the general level of earnings or the national insurance lower earnings limit. That is to address the concern explained by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Dame Anne Begg), the Chair of the Select Committee in her intervention a few moments ago. The new clauses would put a duty on the Secretary of State to establish within two years a review into allowing transfers into NEST, and to review any order he makes on contribution limits in the scheme.

The Labour Government were determined to build cross-party consensus on pensions reform, and, thanks to Lord Turner's commission, we succeeded. That was very important. We know that people have been under-saving for their retirement. It is estimated that 7 million people in the UK were not saving enough to provide an adequate retirement income. According to Scottish Widows, 20% of people were not saving at all for retirement. Overcoming that problem requires the establishment of a system that people can be confident will endure beyond a future change of Government. I welcome the fact that the principles have indeed survived a change of Government.

The levels of saving among people on low incomes are a particular cause for concern. While 77% of people earning £31,000 a year have savings, that applies to only 56% of people on average earnings and 44% of people on £18,000. The Office for National Statistics has reported that, thanks to the global financial crisis, pension savings fell by £2 billion in 2009-2010. The importance of tackling under-saving has risen even since auto-enrolment was first proposed.

The final report of the pensions commission in 2006 recommended three steps to tackle under-saving: a higher state pension age, restoration of the earnings link for the state pension and the introduction of automatic enrolment—the subject of these amendments. For a long time, inertia had acted against people building up sufficient savings for retirement. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Glenda Jackson) has commented on the effect of complex products on people's understanding of the cost of products. Other demands on people's income mean that people do not get around to saving. Auto-enrolment will harness inertia to the opposite effect by making saving, rather than not saving, the default option. We continue to support auto-enrolment into workplace pensions, and we are keen to maintain the consensus established for it. Partly for that reason, however, we cannot support the watering down proposed in the Bill.

8.30 pm

Amendment 18 would, as I said, reduce to one month the optional waiting period before an employee is enrolled into a pension scheme. As the Minister explained, the Bill proposes to give employers the option of not enrolling their employees for the first three months of their employment. For the employee, in many cases, that will mean the loss of three months' employer contributions to their pension pot each time they start a new job. Recent research for his Department has shown that people have, on average, 11 jobs in their working lives, and all the indications are that that number is likely to rise. For an average employee, therefore, the three-month window could mean the loss of 33 months' contributions over their working lives. That is no small sum, amounting, it is estimated, to a 7% reduction in final pension funds.

The effect on some groups will be far greater than on others. Agency workers, for instance, who change jobs more regularly will lose even more months of contributions. They do not save as much as the rest of the population, and a three-month threshold would put them at a significant disadvantage. As well as the cost to employees in lost employer contributions, the principle of auto-enrolment would bear a cost from this change. If an employee receives their full wage—without pension contributions being deducted—for the first three months of their employment, they might be less willing to sacrifice their salary when the three months are up and so be more likely to opt out when auto-enrolment is applied to them.

According to the DWP's impact assessment, the waiting period will also hit disproportionately younger employees who change jobs more frequently. The aim of auto-enrolment is to build up a savings culture, but to do that throughout the work force, we need to start young, yet this change chips away at the effectiveness of auto-enrolment for young people. The saving to employers in administrative costs—the Minister touched on this—which the Government argue is the main reason for introducing the waiting period, will be fairly modest: the Johnson review put it at about 2% of total annual costs to employers. I therefore suggest to the Minister that there does not seem to be a case in principle for why the group of employees likely to be affected disproportionately by the change should lose the employer contributions that they would otherwise receive.

Our amendment 18 would reduce the waiting period to one month. We understand the argument that enrolling someone who is at work for a brief period could be unduly costly, but setting the period at one month would lessen significantly the detrimental impact on savings and reduce the amount of lost contributions from employers to employees' pension savings.

Steve Webb: This is obviously a balancing act, but one reason for going beyond one month is seasonal workers. Given that the summer lasts longer than four weeks—perhaps not in Britain, but in general—the right hon. Gentleman's proposals would bring fruit pickers into auto-enrolment. Does that not bother him?

Stephen Timms: No, it does not bother me. The people in that kind of employment might well fall into the category that the Minister mentioned earlier—people who progress later in their working lives, and the earlier that they start their pension saving the better. If they are in a job for more than one month, I would welcome giving them the ability to start saving for their retirement.

Dame Anne Begg: As someone who, in their young days, was a fruit picker in Angus, picking strawberries and raspberries, I think that the only way a fruit picker might end up in auto-enrolment would be if they had other jobs throughout the year that put them above the threshold. However, I can assure the Minister that the three months of the summer for which one would be fruit picking would be unlikely to generate the income that one would need to get over the threshold.

Stephen Timms: I could not have wished for a more effective endorsement of the case that I have put to the House. I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

The Government's waiting period would incur significant costs through lost contributions for 500,000 employees at any one time and amounting to 7% of an average worker's fund over a lifetime. Those losses undermine the principle of auto-enrolment and substantially outweigh the benefit from the small reduction in the annual costs to employers.

Amendments 19 and 20 would link the earnings trigger for auto-enrolment to the increase in either earnings or the lower earnings limit for national insurance. As the Minister set out earlier in his exchange with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South, the Bill will link the level of earnings at which people are auto-enrolled to the higher income tax threshold, with the level reviewed in future according to a number of factors. However, like the three-month waiting period, this measure will exclude a significant number of people from auto-enrolment. Those people will by definition be lower-paid workers, who we know already save proportionately less than others. We also know that they are disproportionately likely to be women.

Earlier the Minister touched on the aspiration that the income tax threshold will in due course rise to £10,000. As my hon. Friend said, there would be a worry if all those earning less than £10,000 were in due course excluded from auto-enrolment as a result. The National Association of Pension Funds has pointed out that that would exclude 17% of all employees and 27%—more than a quarter—of women employees. Adrian Beecroft might be pleased about that, but the Minister should not be. Pension contributions would remain payable on earnings above the national insurance threshold under the plans in the Bill. The TUC has pointed out that moving to that scenario would create a big cliff-edge, so that people would get to, say, £10,000 and suddenly find a large chunk of their earnings deducted, having previously not had anything deducted automatically. That would create a significant disincentive, which the Bill ought to avoid, to enrolment.

We have heard about the basis on which the Government intend to raise the earnings trigger. Their worry is that saving will not deliver sufficient benefits in retirement to be worth while for many people earning below the income tax threshold. However, the Government's own report shows that most people earning around £8,000 to £9,000 a year will not be earning consistently or permanently in that range, as the Minister underlined, but will move up the income scale.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the danger of starting when incomes are too low is that the amount in the pot might be so risibly low that it would undermine the obvious advantages that auto-enrolment will deliver over the next 20 years or so?

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman has a point—the Minister also made that point—which is that if the threshold was down at the national insurance threshold, the amounts involved could be tiny. What I am suggesting in our amendments is that the way in which the higher threshold that has now been agreed is subsequently uprated should be constrained. If it is not, a large number of people could be undesirably excluded from auto-enrolment at a time when it might be very much to their advantage to be included, particularly if the threshold goes up to £10,000.

The Minister will tell us—indeed, he already has—that people whose earnings are between the contribution threshold and the earnings trigger can opt into the scheme if they feel they are missing out. However, people have always been able to opt in; the problem is that they have chosen not to. That is why we have

[Stephen Timms]

auto-enrolment. The point is that opt-ins have not worked. We need a step change. It is unfair to exclude people on lower wages, because they need to be part of the scheme too.

Our two new clauses would place a duty on the Secretary of State to review allowing transfers into NEST and the contribution limits on the scheme. The limits on transfers in and annual contributions were a factor in creating consensus on auto-enrolment—the Minister was right about that. They were correct at the time, and helped us to focus the scheme on where it was needed.

The Johnson review that the Government commissioned was clear about what ought to happen next. It made the point that the Government needed to review those two areas before the planned 2017 review. Paul Johnson said:

> "Government and regulators should review as a matter of some urgency how to ensure that it is more straightforward for people to move their pension pot with them as they move employer, so that by the time of the 2017 review the more general issue of pension transfers has been addressed and NEST is able to receive transfers in and pay transfers out."

The Minister suggested that to do two reviews would muddle things, but that is precisely what the Johnson review calls for, and I think that it does so with good reason. The report argues that that will be

> "critical to the success of the reform".

If this review does not occur before 2017, savers will spend years with fragmented savings in numerous pots that they are unable to combine. They will lose out on the benefits of being able to purchase an annuity on better terms as a result of having one, larger pot of money rather than several small ones. In some circumstances, they might also lose out due to higher management charges or as a result of deferred member penalties.

The Minister has offered some encouragement on this. I notice that he told a pensions conference last month of his vision that people will end up with what he described as "one big fat pot" instead of lots of little ones. However, no provision to review transfers in before 2017 appears on the face of the Bill, which means that people will continue to have lots of little pots, and his vision will remain unfulfilled.

It is right that contribution limits are in place while NEST is being established, but we should look again at whether those limits are necessary sooner rather than later. The Johnson review recommended that the Government legislate to remove the cap in 2017, which would be difficult if the review were commencing only in that year. The amendment therefore provides for a review in 2014. We remain wholeheartedly on the side of the consensus over auto-enrolment, but we believe that some changes are needed.

I shall also be listening with great interest to the speech of the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) in favour of her new clause 1. I was pleased that the Minister sounded well disposed towards it, although we shall need to know precisely what is going to happen to make its aims a reality. I hope that we can make progress in that area, as well as in the others that I have mentioned in my speech.

Harriett Baldwin: I should like to discuss auto-enrolment in general, and new clause 1 in particular. The new clause has been tabled in my name and those of my colleagues on the Work and Pensions Select Committee and several other hon. Friends. This part of the Bill enjoys much greater cross-party consensus than the matters that we were discussing earlier.

Auto-enrolment will improve the pensions landscape in this country for ever. For the first time, millions of ordinary workers will be brought into personal pensions. Between 3 million and 4 million women will begin pension savings, and a total of 10 million pension savers could be created by the massive nudge that they will get from this part of the Bill.

For a typical worker on an average income, the expectation is that, from the age of 22 until their retirement at, say, 67, there is much more likely to be a persistency of saving. For example, a woman earning £25,000 who is saving 5% of her income would save £100 a month. Her employer would make up a similar amount and, with tax breaks over her working lifetime and reasonable investment growth, that regular savings habit could create a pot worth some £200,000 in today's money. Pessimists have said that that would provide an income of only about 45% of that person's earnings in retirement, but I say that that is 45% more than they would have had without this enormous nudge. I welcome this step, which I believe will, in the fullness of time, reduce the number of my constituents who as pensioners really worry about making ends meet.

8.45 pm

Albert Einstein described compound interest as the eighth wonder of the world, but sadly too many Britons have learned only about the negative effects of compound interest on their credit cards. However, with auto-enrolment in pension savings, many more will learn of the plus side for their personal balance-sheets.

New clause 1 was tabled because many of us are concerned about the point at which individuals retire and convert their pot of money into their retirement income. According to the Minister earlier, about 60% of people with such a retirement pot do not move to another provider at the time they take their retirement income. Just as auto-enrolment is designed to nudge a person out of inertia about their pensions savings, so new clause 1 would give a person a great big nudge to prevent them from failing to shop around for a better retirement income.

Dame Anne Begg: Does the hon. Lady accept that there might also be a nudge to the pension providers? If they know that they will not automatically get the business from those who have saved with them throughout the lifetime of their pension savings scheme and that that group of people is likely to shop around, those pension providers might improve the annuity on offer to individuals.

Harriett Baldwin: That is an excellent point, and I hope we all fervently agree that competition in this area would be an excellent improvement. Locking in your retirement income is the second most important financial decision that you will ever make. I apologise; I do not mean you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but an individual.

Unlike buying a house, however, it is a completely irreversible decision—one that will last for the rest of the individual's life.

The different rates offered by different providers could mean one's retirement income being as much as 20% lower if one does not shop around. If we are unlucky enough to suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, a heart condition, kidney failure, certain types of cancer, multiple sclerosis or chronic asthma or if we smoke, the one bright side is that a 40% higher retirement income could be achieved by shopping around. People who have enjoyed good health in their career but been in a hazardous occupation such as mining might find someone who will offer them a better retirement income. The right hon. Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks), who is no longer in his place, knows that this does not apply to the state pension, but for the pensions we are talking about that involve the insurance market, those factors do apply. My fellow Select Committee members and I thus feel strongly about the value of this particular approach.

Kate Green: I am pleased to welcome the hon. Lady's new clause. Does she agree that many people are reluctant or even in denial when it comes to facing decisions about their pensions and that there is a real opportunity here to spread a good news message about both the value of saving and making positive decisions about how to invest the product of that saving, thus providing an opportunity for the pensions industry to get on the front foot in engaging people in their long-term financial security?

Harriett Baldwin: I welcome that sensible intervention. I think this will completely transform the landscape. I spoke about an individual with a £200,000 lump sum at retirement. If we multiply that by the up to 10 million additional savers that we could be looking at, it shows how this country's savings culture is going to be transformed. The scale of the issue to which new clause 1 refers will get much bigger over time.

The Minister reassured us in his earlier comments that there is a cross-departmental working group. I certainly hope that that group will move quickly to come up with some firm recommendations. I know that all who are signatories to this particular new clause look forward to that. We look forward, too, to seeing the action that will come about as a result.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I strongly support the principle of auto-enrolment. As was pointed out by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), it means that from 2012 onwards, millions of people will save for a pension for the first time. We need a low-cost, trustworthy system in the United Kingdom if we are to begin to lift future generations out of pensioner poverty.

I fully support the establishment of NEST, as currently only 50% of employees contribute to a private pension, and for many of those on lower incomes the current system is poor. Research has shown that if a typical British and a typical Dutch person save exactly the same amount for their retirement, the Dutch person will end up with a 50% larger pension under the current scheme. I believe that that is because in the UK it is often not clear how high pension charges can be. For instance, a person who is sold a pension and charged at 1.5% per annum may not realise that over the lifetime of the pension, 38% of their possible income could be lost to fees.

In the past, pension companies were unwilling to provide the low-cost pensions of the type needed under auto-enrolment, as they felt that the ordinary low-paid workers had what the industry deemed "unattractive lives"—a somewhat derogatory term which simply meant that it was not easy to make money out of those policies. Indeed, it was because of the failure of the current structure to provide such pensions that it was necessary to establish NEST.

I welcome auto-enrolment, I welcome NEST and I welcome new clause 2, but three points cause me concern. My concern about auto-enrolment was prompted by some of the evidence given to the Work and Pensions Committee relating to a lack of regulation. I was troubled to hear that there would be no restrictions on how workplace pension savings are invested, and no record-keeping requirements for providers. The meeting between the Select Committee and the Pensions Regulator gave me very little reassurance. It appears that during the drafting of the Bill, many interested parties gained concessions. Employers, whether large, small or micro—along with the pensions industry—have been pleased to note that restrictions will be placed on NEST, but not necessarily on other alternative providers.

I believe that the restrictions placed on contributions to NEST, a vehicle for workers whose employers have no pension provision, may push some employers who are new to the pensions arena towards less scrupulous pension providers, I realise that NEST is aimed at lower earners, but some of the restrictions placed on it may nudge employers who are baffled by the choices facing them towards a pension provider that does not have such restrictions, but may well provide an unattractive pension scheme for the employee. It appears that the industry and employers have been around the negotiating table, but that the employees' voice has not yet been heard.

If employers reject NEST because of the contribution limit, or other limits, they may place employees in schemes with unfairly high charges. I am deeply concerned about the apparent lack of a quality test for schemes that would be deemed to be a qualifying alternative to NEST. We know from past mis-selling scandals that too few people understand how charges, and pensions, work, and that—as in the case of the mis-selling of endowment policies—it can take many years for such practices to come to light. I ask the Minister to consider, with the benefit of hindsight in regard to previous mis-selling problems, what measures he intends to take to ensure that we do not store up similar troubles with auto-enrolment outside NEST.

My second point, which the Minister has touched on, relates to the ban on transfers to NEST, which resulted from lobbying from the pensions industry and which will benefit that industry at the expense of employees in the scheme. Under the current rules, people who are auto-enrolled in a scheme and go into NEST will not be able to move existing pots into the scheme. Such a ban cannot benefit the very employees and future pensioners whom we are trying to assist; it can only support the industry. I believe that a modern pension in a modern age should be portable, and that provisions for transfers

[Teresa Pearce]

in and out of NEST should be included in the Bill even if they cannot be implemented immediately. I welcomed some of the reassurances given by the Minister in his opening remarks.

My third reason for concern is the three-month waiting period. Although I understand the need to balance the administrative burden for businesses, it means that half a million fewer people will be automatically enrolled. As has been pointed out twice already today, nowadays many people have 11 different employers over their lifetimes. I would support a reduction to one month. Nevertheless, employees are currently able to opt in to the system from the first day of their employment; but they need to know that they have that right. I urge the Minister to amend the measures to require employers to ensure that employees are aware from when they start their employment that they can opt in from day one and receive employer pensions contributions.

The pensions cap combined with the three-month opt-out and the inability to transfer into NEST will prevent casual workers and part-time workers—mainly women—from building a decent pot, even though that is our aim. I ask the Minister to consider these concerns and in his closing remarks to give the House further assurances as to how they can be addressed.

Glenda Jackson: I rise to speak in support of the new clause of the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin). I also strongly endorse everything my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) has just said. I, too, strongly support auto-enrolment. It offers a genuine breakthrough in attracting those people who presume that saving has nothing to offer them, which is not infrequently because their wages have been extremely low.

This scheme requires greater Government support, however. I was concerned by the Minister's somewhat sanguine attitude towards what the established pensions industry is going to do. As the hon. Member for West Worcestershire said, millions of people will for the first time feel encouraged to begin to save for their future.

Those people have always been out there, but the existing pensions industry has done absolutely nothing to attract them into savings. If it is suddenly interested in this new market, I wonder what it finds so attractive. The Minister referred to the CBI, which is a confederation of major employers. However, from my point of view the real silver lining of the scheme is that it will attract employers who employ only a few staff and their employees.

I am not making a party political point here, but we are currently in a period when people's standards of living are falling. The most recent report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that most people's standard of living has fallen by 7%. That will serve only to reinforce the existing reluctance of small business men and their employees on low incomes to see any benefits in saving for the future, and the pensions industry does not seem in any way geared up to make it attractive.

My hon. Friend spoke about the mis-selling scandals of the past. I need only refer to payment protection insurance. The mis-selling of that was conducted by bankers, and at that time they were considered to be rock-solid people, although that assessment has now changed dramatically in this country and the entire world. There have been far too many examples of excessive charges. I have also referred to the impenetrable documents issued to us by our pension providers. The problem is not simply their length or the smallness of the print; they are completely incomprehensible.

I understand that the Government cannot simply say to everybody, "Listen, the only scheme you should go into is this new scheme, NEST." However, as that option is not available to them, they must work with the existing pensions industry to ensure that safeguards are in place.

The Government have attempted to make some changes in another supposedly competitive industry: the energy industry. They have markedly failed, however. There is no genuine competition in that industry. We, the people who have to pay the bills, know that, and *Which?* has said it, as have Ofgem and the Government.

This measure is a major step forward and, as I have said, I absolutely endorse it, because it genuinely seems to be a way of ensuring that people can have a more secure future for themselves. Not only that, but we also hope it will relieve the tax burden for generations to come and it should give people a greater sense of being in charge of their own destinies. However, that is not possible if they are not absolutely satisfied and guaranteed that the pensions being sold are actually transparent and honest, and that the detail is specific and clear to them—

9 pm

Debate interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E), That the clause be read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

New clause 2 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

Clause 14

ARRANGEMENTS WHERE TRANSITIONAL CONDITIONS CEASE TO BE SATISFIED

Amendments made: 15, page 11, line 40, leave out

'In section 30(5) of the 2008 Act'

and insert—

'( ) Section 30 of the 2008 Act is amended as follows.

( ) In subsection (5)'.

Amendment 16, page 11, line 41, at end insert—

'( ) In subsection (6)(b) omit "(in accordance with section 20(1))".'.—*(Steve Webb.)*

New Clause 3

DEFINITION OF MONEY PURCHASE BENEFITS

'(1) In section 181 of the Pension Schemes Act 1993 (interpretation), in the definition of "money purchase benefits" in subsection (1), for "which are not average salary benefits" substitute "which fall within section 181B".

(2) After section 181A of that Act insert—

"181B Money purchase benefits: supplementary

(1) This section applies for the purposes of the definition of "money purchase benefits" in section 181(1).

(2) A benefit other than a pension in payment falls within this section if its rate or amount is calculated solely by reference to assets which (because of the nature of the calculation) must necessarily suffice for the purposes of its provision to or in respect of the member.

(3) A benefit which is a pension in payment falls within this section if—

(a) its provision to or in respect of the member is secured by an annuity contract or insurance policy made or taken out with an insurer, and

(b) at all times before coming into payment the pension was a benefit falling within this section by virtue of subsection (2).

(4) For the purposes of subsection (2) it is immaterial if the calculation of the rate or amount of the benefit includes deductions for administrative expenses or commission.

(5) In this section references to a pension do not include income withdrawal or dependants' income withdrawal (within the meaning of paragraphs 7 and 21 of Schedule 28 to the Finance Act 2004)."

(3) In section 99 of the Pensions Act 2008 (interpretation) in the definition of "money purchase benefits" for "which are not average salary benefits" substitute "which fall within section 99A".

(4) After that section insert—

"99A Money purchase benefits: supplementary

(1) This section applies for the purposes of the definition of "money purchase benefits" in section 99.

(2) A benefit other than a pension in payment falls within this section if its rate or amount is calculated solely by reference to assets which (because of the nature of the calculation) must necessarily suffice for the purposes of its provision to or in respect of the member.

(3) A benefit which is a pension in payment falls within this section if—

(a) its provision to or in respect of the member is secured by an annuity contract or insurance policy made or taken out with an insurer, and

(b) at all times before coming into payment the pension was a benefit falling within this section by virtue of subsection (2).

(4) For the purposes of subsection (2) it is immaterial if the calculation of the rate or amount of the benefit includes deductions for administrative expenses or commission.

(5) In this section references to a pension do not include income withdrawal or dependants' income withdrawal (within the meaning of paragraphs 7 and 21 of Schedule 28 to the Finance Act 2004)."

(5) In paragraph 1(2) of Schedule 10A to the Building Societies Act 1986 (disclosures about directors etc), in the definition of "money purchase benefits", for "which are not average salary benefits" substitute "which fall within paragraph 1A".

(6) In that Schedule, after paragraph 1 insert—

1A (1) This paragraph applies for the purposes of the definition of "money purchase benefits" in paragraph 1(2).

(2) A benefit other than a pension in payment falls within this paragraph if its rate or amount is calculated solely by reference to assets which (because of the nature of the calculation) must necessarily suffice for the purposes of its provision to or in respect of the director.

(3) A benefit which is a pension in payment falls within this paragraph if—

(a) its provision to or in respect of the director is secured by an annuity contract or insurance policy made or taken out with an insurer, and

(b) at all times before coming into payment the pension was a benefit falling within this paragraph by virtue of sub-paragraph (2).

(4) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (2) it is immaterial if the calculation of the rate or amount of the benefit includes deductions for administrative expenses or commission.

(5) In this paragraph references to a pension do not include income withdrawal or dependants' income withdrawal (within the meaning of paragraphs 7 and 21 of Schedule 28 to the Finance Act 2004)."

(7) The amendments made by subsections (1) and (2) are to be regarded as having come into force on 1 January 1997.

(8) The amendments made by subsections (3) and (4) are to be regarded as having come into force at the same time as section 99 of the Pensions Act 2008.'—*(Steve Webb.)*

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 4

TRANSITIONAL

'(1) The Secretary of State may by regulations make transitional provision in relation to the coming into force of the amendments in section [Definition of money purchase benefits].

(2) That provision includes in particular—

(a) provision disapplying the amendments in section [Definition of money purchase benefits] in relation to an occupational or personal pension scheme which is wound up before the coming into force of that section;

(b) provision disapplying the amendments in section [Definition of money purchase benefits] to any extent, or as regards any period, in respect of an occupational or personal pension scheme in relation to which those amendments would otherwise have applied on the coming into force of that section;

(c) provision modifying the application of an enactment in respect of an occupational or personal pension scheme in relation to which the amendments in section [Definition of money purchase benefits] apply on the coming into force of that section;

(d) provision requiring trustees or managers of an occupational pension scheme in relation to which the amendments in section [Definition of money purchase benefits] apply on the coming into force of that section to obtain an actuarial valuation of a description specified in the regulations.

(3) In subsection (2) "occupational pension scheme" and "personal pension scheme" have the meanings given by section 1 of the Pension Schemes Act 1993.'—*(Steve Webb.)*

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 5

CONSEQUENTIAL AND SUPPLEMENTARY

'(1) The Secretary of State may by regulations make consequential or supplementary provision in relation to the amendments made by section [Definition of money purchase benefits].

(2) In section 307 of the Pensions Act 2004 (modification of Act) in subsection (2) after paragraph (b) insert—

"(ba) Part 3 (scheme funding),".'—*(Steve Webb.)*

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 6

POWER TO MAKE FURTHER PROVISION

'(1) The Secretary of State may by regulations amend for any purpose the definition of "money purchase benefit" in the Pension Schemes Act 1993, the Pensions Act 2008 or Schedule 10A to the Building Societies Act 1986.

(2) Regulations under subsection (1) may in particular amend the provisions inserted by section [Definition of money purchase benefits] above).

(3) Regulations under this section may include transitional, consequential or supplementary provision.'—*(Steve Webb.)*

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 7

REGULATIONS

'(1) Regulations under this Part may—

(a) make different provision for different cases (including different provision for pension schemes of different descriptions);

(b) provide for a person to exercise a discretion in dealing with any matter;

(c) amend Acts (as well as other enactments);

(d) have retrospective effect.

(2) Regulations under this Part must be made by statutory instrument.

(3) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this Part which amend an Act may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(4) A statutory instrument containing any other regulations under this Part is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.'—*(Steve Webb.)*

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

Clause 32

COMMENCEMENT

Amendment made: 17, page 22, line 1, at end insert—

'() sections [Transitional] to [Regulations];'.—*(Steve Webb.)*

Third Reading

Queen's consent signified.

9.1 pm

Mr Duncan Smith: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I welcome the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) to his place. Notwithstanding our earlier little exchanges, I unreservedly welcome him. I am sure that he will be a great asset to his party, and I look forward to other clashes and debates that we may have as time goes on. I thank the Members on both sides of the House who served with distinction on the Public Bill Committee for their help in scrutinising the Bill. They have had to hang around for quite a long time, but we are where we are now. I also thank the Opposition for their approach to many of the positive debates on the Bill's clauses. May I also extend my appreciation to my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) for chairing the Committee sittings through those longer moments?

It is also right that I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Pensions Minister for his commitment to taking this important legislation through this House. If there is anybody in government who has championed the cause of the low-paid in pensions, it is him. It is a privilege and pleasure to work with him in this coalition—a very firm coalition in our case. On a departmental point, may I back him up on what he said about one of our civil servants, Evelyn Arnold, whom the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) knows? She is retiring after a long time and has seen so many of these things go through, and it is right for us to thank those who serve us without normal comment. So, without question, I thank her for the time she has spent, on behalf of all parties in government, getting this sort of legislation through.

Over the past few months, a number of amendments were made that I believe have improved the Bill, and I shall run through them. With the blessing of the House, I do not intend to spend much time on them because we have been through them a lot. Amendment 1 related to the consumer prices index underpin, where we have listened to concerns and responded by ensuring that schemes that use the retail prices index will not have to uprate by CPI in the years when it is higher. We have heard the issues raised on deferred member charges and, having listened, we have extended an existing reserve power to cap charges to also cover deferred members. That enables the Government to protect all scheme members from high charges regardless of what might come in the future, which is an important feature. Thirdly, we have also made an amendment to clarify the definition of money purchase benefits in light of the Supreme Court's recent judgment in Houldsworth *v.* Bridge, ensuring that schemes and members continue to have adequate protection.

The House will be aware that we have listened and responded to concerns about the women most affected by the accelerated rise in the state pension age. Last week we announced that no women will see their state pension age increase by more than 18 months. We have always been clear that our policy will not change and we will still equalise the state pension age by 2018 and increase it to 66 by 2020. We have, however, honoured the commitment I gave on Second Reading to ease the transition process for those who are most affected. I listened with interest to the debate, but the point that is sometimes missed is that the adjustment means that nearly 250,000 women will have a lower state pension age as a result of the change, as will a similar number of men: 500,000 people at a cost of just over £1 billion in the next spending period. We should not sniff at that.

Stephen Timms *rose—*

Mr Duncan Smith: Before I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, let me make a small point. I understand why the Opposition want to trumpet a great deal about this. Having sat in opposition, I understand that getting self-righteous about such things in defence of others who raise them is exactly what Opposition Members do. As some of my hon. Friends said earlier, however, unless the Opposition can guarantee that they will reverse the measure if and when they come into government, in essence they are doing something quite cynical by raising the hopes of women outside, knowing only too well secretly that they will never make the change. If I give way, I would like to hear that the Opposition absolutely plan to reverse this measure and change it in government.

Stephen Timms: One thing the Opposition are entitled to do is ask the Government to explain why they are doing what they are doing. At a time when the Government are increasing the state pension age by one year for many people, what is the justification for picking out 500,000 women and treating them more harshly than everybody else?

Mr Duncan Smith: I think the right hon. Gentleman knows the answer to that question. It is wholly part of the process of equalisation and of moving everybody on at the same time for the extra year's increase. That answers his point, but, as he knows in his heart of hearts—I consider him a reasonable man in his dealings most of all—the real point is that had Labour been in government, I suspect that they would have done almost exactly the same things.

The generation below my generation is likely to retire on a lower income in retirement, the first generation to do so, as a result of all the problems we have had with the economy—which the previous Government left for us and for which we never get an apology—and the reality that not enough people have been saving. We are about to condemn a generation of people who will struggle to save for their pensions and who will have to pay off elements of the debt that we—this generation going through Parliament—have overseen while at the same time paying for those who are already in retirement, and we must do something to help them rid us of that debt so that they do not pick up such a large proportion of it and are not saddled with it as they attempt to bring up their children and earn a living at the same time.

Stephen Timms: The Secretary of State is explaining why the state pension age needs to be raised and our amendments did not oppose the increase of one year. We are still waiting, however, for some justification why this particular group of 500,000 women must wait more than a year—longer than everyone else—to reach their state pension age.

Mr Duncan Smith: I think I have explained that. As I said earlier and as the right hon. Gentleman knows well, the acceleration is about reaching equalisation in time to move the age to 66. We can bandy this subject about, but the point remains that the Opposition must come to terms with something quite important. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, who opened the debate on Report, suggested that £11 billion—he insisted on saying £10 billion, but I must tell him that the figure is £11 billion—was no great problem and not an issue in the great scheme of things. That is, in a sense, the problem. I remind him that to save £5 billion in real terms today straight off, we would have to cut the education budget by 10%. That is the nature of how we would have to find the money.

I simply say to the Opposition that I understand the rules of opposition—goodness gracious, we spent enough time in opposition ourselves—and the temptations that come with opposition, but realistically they should be saying to all those women that we have made a major move. We are prepared to spend an extra £1 billion to make sure that those who were excessively caught in that trap are not any more. I think that is fair and reasonable and that the Opposition need to explain to women up and down the land why they are making a big fuss about this when they know, cynically, that they would not overturn this if they came to government. That is a very cynical position to be in—to whip up this emotion outside and then calmly and quietly say, "Of course, we can't change it." I am afraid that is bad politics and bad decision making.

Glenda Jackson: Perhaps the Secretary of State would like to hear what some of the women in my constituency think about the Government's changes regarding their pension age. Their view is that the Government have made this very small change—it is a very small movement—which has nothing whatever to do with a concern for those women in their old age, because they are losing the women's vote—and my constituents are not by nature cynical.

Mr Duncan Smith: After listening to the Opposition tonight, they ought to be. One thing I will be certain to tell them whenever I encounter them is that at least I am being honest about what we are trying to do. We inherited a major economic problem, with a deficit that was out of control and burgeoning debt—the two are linked just in case the Opposition do not remember that. The reality is that, on both counts, we are charged with reducing the amounts. That is not something that is given to just a few Ministers—it is ultimately about taxpayers and about those who get pensions.

We have listened and we have done something quite significant—not small—to give way. To cap this at 18 months and spend £1 billion is, as my hon. Friends have recognised, a big step. Of course, in a perfect world, as the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jenny Willott) said, if all things were equal we would have loved to be able to do more, but the reality that we face is that this country has to get its debt under control. As I said earlier, the real burden is not going to fall on the shoulders of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Glenda Jackson) or on mine but on those of our children and grandchildren if we do not do something about that debt. I am not prepared to think to myself, "I must charge around and say that I am worried about this group or that group." I have to say to them honestly, "All of us, together, recognise that we must do the best for the next generation coming through," as well as doing our best, as the Pensions Minister said, for those who are due to retire.

With the amendments in place, I believe that the Bill has reached Third Reading with its fundamental principles firmly intact. I have repeatedly said that the Bill is, in large part, about the next generation—a generation who will have to pay for their parents' retirement while footing the bill for their own savings and also for the debt.

I want to discuss auto-enrolment which, as the right hon. Member for East Ham rightly said, was started by his Government. We committed to continue it and I like to think that we have done that in the best spirit possible, taking into account the difficult financial considerations. The key will be getting many more people into saving. As he knows, some 9 million to 10 million people will be eligible under the new system. That is why we are taking forward plans for automatic enrolment into pension schemes—plans that were debated and widely supported across the House.

The Bill refines some of the parameters of automatic enrolment legislation and ensures that we take forward a model that will work for the individual, I hope, as well as for the employers who will be our key partners in delivering these reforms. There was a question about the three-month point and I wanted to make a point about those who are in work for three months in these firms and then move on—90% will move on, so the issue we are dealing with concerns a much smaller group than people have been leading us to believe. I do not agree with those who say categorically that this is a

[Mr Duncan Smith]

problem for growth. Auto-enrolment is good for the country, good for people who save and, ultimately, good for growth because it puts the economy on a firm footing, based on savings. I stand here today categorically prepared to take on anybody on that basis, and I will continue to do so, as will the Pensions Minister and, indeed, all of us. Others who support us on this include the TUC, the CBI and the National Association of Pension Funds. I hope that, as a consideration, we will move forward on this together.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on the consumer prices index uprating and judicial pensions. I know that everybody in the House is worried about the judicial pension scheme that is going through in the Bill, but none the less we will press on. As I made clear on Second Reading, the Bill makes a few relatively minor changes to the legislation governing the uprating of occupational pensions. It amends references to the retail prices index to read instead the "general level of prices" to ensure consistency with the rest of the legislation. It does not specify the measure for the general level of prices. I am pleased to see that the Opposition support us in all of this, although after talking to some Opposition Back Benchers, I do not think they were aware that the Government and the Opposition are apparently as one on CPI.

On judicial pensions, I will simply say that this is a key part of building a more responsible pension system, and I am pleased that the provisions have received the widespread support of the House.

I shall conclude, as others may want to speak. When we introduced the Bill, we were clear about the principle behind it: a desire to secure a better deal for our children through incentivising saving and sharing the costs of retirement more evenly between the generations. I hope there are more changes to come, with the other pension reforms that my hon. Friend the Minister spoke about, which will incentivise saving and give people a base income in retirement that they can understand and calculate. These changes should be seen in the light of all those wider reforms. We are currently working on that state pension design and consulting on the option of a single tier. All this will, I hope, provide a better deal for many women and self-employed people who have historically tended to suffer poorer pension outcomes. The changes that we are making to our retirement system are designed to put it back on firm foundations, establishing a new and fairer settlement between young and old.

I return to one point. It is a challenge to any Opposition, I guess, to have been in government and created something of which they are justifiably proud—auto-enrolment. We wanted to continue with it and we have done our level best to do that. That is the most important and powerful part of this Bill of reform. Given the importance of auto-enrolment, and notwithstanding all the heat and light generated by the Opposition's arguments today about the level and the speed at which the state pension retirement age has moved, when they sit down and consider what is in the Bill that we are about to pass—automatic enrolment to improve the savings and outcomes for people in future years—I hope the Opposition will do the right thing and support the Bill. On that basis I commend the Bill to the House.

9.17 pm

Stephen Timms: The Bill certainly has some welcome features, as well as some very regrettable, unwelcome features. I shall touch on both aspects in my contribution.

The recommendations of the Pensions Commission chaired by Lord Turner were broadly accepted across the House. As Pensions Minister at the time, I was extremely impressed by the energy and commitment brought to their task by Lord Turner and his fellow commissioners, John Hills and the now Baroness Jeannie Drake. They were successful in putting together an all-party consensus, which has endured. We will continue to work consensually with the Government as far as we can for the strategy that was developed in the review.

The first element of that was auto-enrolment into a low-cost national scheme. I agree with the Secretary of State about the significance of that change and I welcome his confirmation that the Government will not move away from their commitment to auto-enrolment. The second element was an increase in the state pension age, and re-linking the level of the state pension with earnings was the third.

But it is not fair for the costs of this trinity of measures to be borne disproportionately by any one group in society, whether that group is defined by age, occupation or gender. The Bill would unfortunately affect some groups far more than others. We have just had a debate touching on the fact that young people and agency workers, who move jobs more frequently than average, are likely to lose many months of employers' contributions because of the changes, as well as the chance of building up a savings habit, because of the introduction of a waiting period in auto-enrolment. Up to a million people on low wages would be left out of auto-enrolment owing to the increase in the level of the earnings threshold. But most significantly of all, and this is what gives us a real problem with the Bill, half a million women aged 56 and 57 will find themselves waiting up to 18 months longer for their state pension, and a third of a million will be waiting a full 18 months extra, with too little time to plan for the change. That is a serious problem.

We welcome the Government's recognition that the original Bill was wrong, and what we have now is certainly a welcome change. I make no bones about welcoming the change that has been made, the concession in response to the big and entirely proper campaign that took place, but the Bill still leaves half a million women in the lurch. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) led the argument against the original ill thought-out plans, and I welcome the change that has occurred, but, with so many women still affected, Ministers cannot claim that they have solved the problem.

We understand why the state pension age is being increased by one year for many people, because the Secretary of State set out why and our amendments did not oppose the increase, but what has struck me about tonight's debate is that no Government Member supporting the Bill has provided any justification why it is being increased by more than one year for half a million women—and not for a single man. What is the justification for picking out that group of half a million women and treating them more harshly than everybody else?

Why are those women being picked out for worse treatment? We have been given no justification at all, except that it will save a lot of money. No doubt it will, but the Secretary of State has a responsibility to develop a policy that can be defended, that has some rationale to it, not simply telling us, "Well, this is going to save us a lot of money." There needs to be some justification for the change that is being made, and no justification—at least none that I can understand—has been made at all for picking out that group of half a million women.

The Pensions Policy Institute recommends that 10 years' notice be given for people to plan for a change in their pension age, and the Turner report recommended a longer period, but the plans in the Bill still give some women as little as five years, and that is simply not enough. It is just not fair to those affected to impose on them such a big change with so little notice.

Those women have relied on an implicit contract of reasonableness and fairness between government and citizens when planning their retirement, and, if the truth is that government cannot be trusted to keep its side of the bargain, how are people expected to plan for pensions saving at all? Pension saving is inherently long-term in character, but it simply will not happen if the Government make a habit of sudden policy lurches that undermine the assumptions on which people have been encouraged to build in the past, so it is no wonder so many women feel so badly let down by what the Government have done.

We are talking about a 10-year period beginning in 2016. Under the coalition's plans, unless they are to continue the current effectively zero-growth policy indefinitely, those savings are about the long-term sustainability of the pensions system, and we support, as our amendments tonight supported, the proposal to find further savings, if necessary, by bringing forward the date at which the rise to 67 years old occurs, as long as people have time to organise their affairs and to plan accordingly. The sudden unpredictable lurch, not mentioned by either coalition party in the general election campaign or in the coalition agreement, has caused the problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Gregg McClymont) stated on Report, our objection to this part of the Bill is that it achieves these very large savings solely at the expense of one age cohort of women, apparently on a wholly arbitrary basis. The data are very clear. Women have substantially lower savings than men, yet a group of women—older women who have the least time to plan for the change—are being asked to bear the cost. The Bill simply fails the fairness test, and for that reason, in particular, we cannot support its Third Reading. We understand that Ministers are worried about rapidly plunging popularity among women voters and we are told that they are puzzled about why that is happening. They should just take a careful look at the unfairness in this Bill, and they will find a ready explanation there. We will not support that unfairness in the Lobby tonight, and no one else who values fairness should do so either.

The third of a million women with a wait of an extra 18 months will lose, just in state pension, pension payments averaging £7,800, and if one allows for pension credit and other passported benefits, we are talking about significantly greater sums still. Those women, if they are not working at the moment, will find it hard to find new jobs in the current labour market. Given that 37% of them are currently not in work, how are they supposed to make up that shortfall? We have been given no answers to that question.

As I think we would all agree, the design of the future pensions system should maintain inter-generational fairness. Imposing such large costs on one group of women means that the Bill fails to meet that fairness test. What became of the Burkean compact between generations to which Conservatives once subscribed?

Jenny Willott *rose—*

Stephen Timms: I will gladly give way to a non-Conservative.

Jenny Willott: Is the right hon. Gentleman able to answer the question that was posed by several hon. Members earlier in the debate, and then again by the Secretary of State, about whether he and his party would plan to repeal the proposals on women's pensions and pension age if they were to come into government after the next election, given that the changes would not have taken place by that time and they would have the opportunity to do that were they so minded?

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East answered that question earlier in the debate. Our view is that there have been too many changes and we would not propose yet another. The hon. Lady needs to explain the justification for picking out this particular group of half a million women and treating them more harshly than everyone else whose state pension age is being raised only by one year. For a third of a million women, it is being raised by a year and a half, and for half a million, it is being raised by more than a year. We have had no explanation and no attempt at a justification. Is it an accident or some kind of mishap? It certainly should be put right, and sadly it has not been put right in the changes that the Government have made.

There are other problems in the Bill. It dilutes the plan for auto-enrolment that was supported across the House. The proposals will leave many low-paid and agency workers outside auto-enrolment, and we think that they should not be left behind. Moreover, the gains from these exclusions, in lower costs for employers, will be small. It would be quite wrong to exclude people just because they work for small companies, as the Conservative party donor Adrian Beecroft is apparently arguing. I greatly appreciate the assurances that we have had about that during the debate, and I hope that Ministers will continue stoutly to resist any such moves if they are promoted from elsewhere in the coalition. The Pensions Commission made it clear that extending the benefits of pensions saving to more people who work for small firms is one of the prizes from this reform, and we must not throw it away.

The Secretary of State is absolutely right to argue that this is a pro-growth, not an anti-growth, change in making it possible for more people to save for a decent retirement. Of course it is right to be concerned about the plight of small firms in the zero-growth economy that we seem to have. I commend to the Government the national insurance holiday for small firms that take on additional workers that is proposed by my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor. We remain strongly

[Stephen Timms]

supportive of the policy of auto-enrolment. We are disappointed, however, that the Government are seeking to water down the proposals around which the all-party consensus was hard won.

We welcome the consensus on the basic building blocks for a more sustainable pensions system, but the Government are quite wrong to load the cost of change so disproportionately on one group of half a million women. For a long time, they did not listen to those women at all. When they did, they came forward with a half measure. The sense of grievance that they have instilled in the women affected will not be readily dispelled. We are pleased to have won a concession, but many people will still be deeply disappointed. For that reason in particular, I urge Members to decline to give the Bill a Third Reading.

9.31 pm

Sheila Gilmore: I am glad that the politicians who sat in this House when I was born and was growing up in this country did not decide that the burden of debt was so great that they could not introduce the reforms that brought us the welfare state. It was not their view that they should stop planning, being optimistic and working towards a better future for their children and grandchildren. Despite the national debt being eye-wateringly high, our predecessors in this place were prepared to go ahead with reform and change.

Today, we have heard several speakers, including the Pensions Minister and the Secretary of State, argue that the Opposition are somehow being unfair to future generations, whereas the Government are being fair, because we would burden people with more debt. I think that our predecessors did the right thing for us. In fact, it was so much the right thing that I suspect it created the problem that we now have with longevity. The incredible improvements in life expectancy over the past 50 or 60 years have their roots in the creation of the welfare state.

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): My parents, and I suspect the hon. Lady's parents, had rationing after the war because the situation was so serious, and it was not good for many years after that.

Sheila Gilmore: Rationing, oddly enough, did a lot for people's health and well-being. For some people in Britain at that time, it did not represent a worse standard of living, although it may have done for others, because during the 1930s many families struggled to put food on their tables because of unemployment.

The point that I was making is that the vision was not constrained by the debt. Things were difficult in many ways in the post-war period, but the Government of the day were nevertheless of the view that one had to plan for the future. I am not a great pessimist about debt. I feel that the whole thing has been grossly misrepresented by Government Members. In the early years of the last decade, the Government reduced the debt. Debt was very high in the period of the last Conservative Government, which people appear to have forgotten. It is not the case that the last Labour Government simply set about building up that debt in some sort of systematic way, to the detriment of future generations, as is suggested.

Of course we have to address how to cease having annual financial deficits, and then in the medium to long term we have to reduce debt. However, at the moment the signs are at the medicine that the coalition parties are applying is not working. The chances are that, the way things are going, we will get to the end of this Parliament with a greater debt. We are already borrowing more than was projected last year, which is indeed quite frightening, but it means that we need to consider what we want to do.

I am not going to make too much of this point, because various people have made it earlier, but all Governments make choices about what they spend money on. We do not believe that the choice to accelerate the pension age rise for women is the right one. There are others that could be made, and we would be making them if we were in government. It has been said in this debate and others that if we cannot immediately identify some cut equivalent to any spending that we suggest is justified and fair, we are somehow being irresponsible. I do not accept that.

I suggested earlier a couple of things that I thought we could do, for example not ending the 50% tax rate, as some Government Members seem keen to do. The idea keeps being floated. We could also consider how we provide tax relief on the pension contributions of people on higher-rate tax earnings, because that is a huge giveaway to those who are already better off. There are a number of choices that we could make. I know that this is not the view of everyone on the Labour Benches, but personally I am not in favour of going ahead with Trident. Some of my colleagues agree with me and some do not, but the important point is that there are always choices.

I was going to say that we had driven people out of the Gallery in this debate, because when I started to speak it was completely empty. However, people have now obviously come in to hear me. People often see the subject of pensions as a bit of a bore and not very exciting, but it is hugely important. I regret greatly that the very good pensions legislation that Barbara Castle introduced, which brought in the state earnings-related pension scheme, was completely destroyed by the last Conservative Government. Had that not happened, many people would be very much better off now.

Although I very much agree with auto-enrolment, I am afraid I do not see it a complete substitute for that legislation. However, we must not move away from auto-enrolment, and I very much welcome the guarantees from the Secretary of State and the Pensions Minister that they will not agree to any delay in its rolling out. Nevertheless, for the reasons that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) gave, I am not in a position to support the Bill tonight.

9.38 pm

Glenda Jackson: Regrettably, I was not here for the opening remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore), but we are clearly of one mind. I share with her the total refusal to accept the Government's interpretation of the situation in which we find ourselves. The Secretary of State made a passionate plea that the debt should not lay a burden on our children and grandchildren, but that plea would have played rather more resonantly with me were it not for the fact that his Government are punishing our children and grandchildren even as we speak.

My parents and grandparents had absolutely no qualms whatever about laying on my generation the burden of debt incurred by fighting and winning a second world war, and I have to say that I am extremely grateful to them for that. I also point out to the Secretary of State that in the intervening decades, the opportunities that were presented to me and millions like me in this country by, as my hon. Friend said, the introduction of the welfare state, had been not only unheard of but undreamt of by people from the social and economic background from which I came. Therefore I, like her, simply refuse to accept that the choices the Government are making in every single area of our national economic life will promote growth, provide a way forward or benefit this country.

I would be more prepared to believe that the changes to the pension system that the Government have introduced—which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, are grossly unfair to women—were driven by the harsh economic climate, which the Government constantly pray in aid, were it not for the fact that that measly six months will save only £1.1 billion. The Government borrow something like 10 times that amount every week. I simply cannot make the figures match—but then neither can they.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I struggle to see the hon. Lady's logic in comparing a debt carried over on behalf of the nation for the second world war with a pension debt that results from the demographic fact of an ageing population for whom we must pay. Is she saying that £1.2 billion is a measly amount? If so, where would she find the other £10 billion that the Labour party are committed to spending by not voting for the Bill?

Glenda Jackson: I trust that the hon. Lady would allow me to use my own adjectives—"measly" is not a word that would immediately spring to my mind to describe £1.1 billion. The fact is that the six-month "pause", which might be a better word to use as far as the hon. Lady's view of the economy is concerned, will apparently save the nation £1.1 billion. That saving will not come in until next year, and it is doing nothing to fill the current hole. That sum is a fraction of what the Government are borrowing week in, week out, because they have markedly failed to do anything to create growth in this country. They have done little or nothing to stimulate our economy. The hon. Lady may smile and shake her head, but I was taught that the only way to get something is by earning it. That is the only way to settle debt.

Mrs Main: What does the hon. Lady think that the money we borrow every week pays for? I suggest that it pays for the debt that we are all committed to reducing.

Glenda Jackson: The hon. Lady is plucking fantasies out of the air—fantasies that the Government have been running for months. The money is certainly not paying to ensure that every child in my constituency has a school place, or that every elderly person in my constituency has secure meals on wheels, or that day centres for the elderly remain open. The Government have done nothing to encourage young people to believe that they have a future. Whatever they are doing with the money, they are certainly not stimulating growth in the country.

I must return to the issues that we are supposedly debating. The Government have imposed a gross unfairness on one half of our people: women. That unfairness is absolutely unacceptable. As I had occasion to say to the Secretary of State in an intervention, for many women in my constituency, the changes to the Bill are nothing more than a cynical attempt by the Government to re-attract the female vote, which, as they read every day in the papers, they are losing.

On the one hand, the Government have introduced this Bill, but on the other, they protest that one of their central planks is ensuring greater equality for women. They say that they want more women in the boardroom, and greater wage equality and equality of opportunity, but then they decide that when a woman has worked all her life—as has been said, she will probably have been in low-paid work, doing two or three jobs at the same time, not least looking after her family, including both children and parents—and when her employment potential is nil, she must struggle on until the state pension comes in.

I strongly and heartily endorse many aspects of auto-enrolment. I do have concerns that the Government will not introduce sufficient teeth to ensure that, if the existing pensions industry does regard auto-enrolment as a business that they would wish to enter, the proper safeguards would be in place to ensure that it remains genuinely competitive, open and transparent, so that people who have never before considered having a pension will not find—as most of us do at the moment—the pension papers to be totally obfuscating so that we are no wiser about where our money is going or what the charges are after reading them.

It will not be possible for me to vote for this Bill, but I strongly endorse auto-enrolment. I urge the Government to think again, even at this late stage, about trying to eradicate this gross unfairness from the Bill.

9.45 pm

Jenny Willott: It will not surprise hon. Members to learn that I welcome the Bill. The issue of women's state pension age has been discussed in full already today, but there is much else in the Bill to be welcomed. Many of the measures have broad support across the House, as we have already heard this evening. Auto-enrolment is, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Glenda Jackson) said, critical to many people who up to now have had no pension savings and have not been in a position to save for their retirement. It is fundamental, and I support it now as I supported it when it was proposed by the previous Government.

We have to get more people saving for their retirement. Far too many people have no savings at all, and when they retire they depend entirely on the basic state pension. It was not designed to provide an adequate living; it was designed as a safety net. But for an awful lot of people it is their sole retirement income, and that is something that we need to change. For years we have been grappling with how to get more people to save, especially those on the lowest incomes. Auto-enrolment is critical, because we need to make it as easy as possible for people to save. We need to make it as easy as possible for businesses to administer, so that it becomes a no-brainer: people will automatically save for retirement without thinking twice about it, and so put themselves in a better position for their retirement.

[Jenny Willott]

Pensions are such an important issue to get right. It is not glamorous, people do not understand it, and it is very complicated. Even when I have conversations with other hon. Members about it, their eyes often glaze over. It is not an issue that people want to discuss, but it is our duty to try to make it as simple as possible for people so that as many as possible have some savings put away for their retirement and can retire in more comfort. That ties in with what my hon. Friend the Minister said earlier about the need to get means-testing out of the system, so that people know that whatever they save while they are working will benefit them in their retirement. We need to ensure that a flat-rate pension is introduced as soon as possible so that people who work, on however low an income, know that whatever they put aside during their working lives will benefit them when they retire, that they will have adequate retirement pensions, and that they will not have to rely on just the basic state pension.

I am saddened that many hon. Members feel unable to support the Bill—

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way at this late hour on Third Reading. She is making a very impassioned speech about women who should save for their retirement, and that is right—but what would she say to the 500,000 women who have made savings and thought about what will happen when they retire, but who will now have to wait 18 months longer for the state pension?

Jenny Willott: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was not able to be in his place earlier when I explained all that. We had a long debate on exactly that point earlier. The whole point of Third Reading is to be able to expand on the issues, and I wish to put on record the fact that I am very supportive of auto-enrolment, as are many other hon. Members, and on the capping of fees, as well as other measures in the Bill that are crucial but have not had as much attention as women's pensions have. I hope that hon. Members will reconsider and feel able to support the Bill this evening, so that we can ensure that more people save for their retirement and do not have to live in poverty.

9.49 pm

Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) set out his misgivings about the Bill. I share some of his trepidation about the effects on the group of women that we have discussed, but I shall be supporting the Government because I disagree with the hon. Members for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore) and for Hampstead and Kilburn (Glenda Jackson), who sought to set out our financial position and compare our debt to that after the second world war. I wish that our financial context was as simple as just the size of the national debt. I have the figures and charts on my iPad: shortly after the second world war the Government were running a surplus—the second largest run since the second world war. It was beaten only in 1970. I would make another point about how the welfare state was founded.

Sheila Gilmore: In terms of annual expenditure, I do not disagree with that, but the surplus was so high partly because personal taxation levels were considerably higher than they are today.

Steve Baker: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's point, because she seems to have pre-empted me—as I rewind on my iPad back to the chart showing taxation. *[Interruption.]* Between 1940 and 1950 the total level of taxation taken out of the economy rose from about 12% to 40% and it has stayed at about 40% since 1970. The context therefore is very different. The Government can only fund themselves through taxation, borrowing and currency debasement. If I wind forward and have a look at the charts on currency debasement, I can tell her that we have been furiously debasing the currency since 1971, which is the reason for the current mess we are in.

I also point out to the hon. Lady that the Bank for International Settlements has provided a number of charts setting out the debt projections for most of the western world, all of which look catastrophic. For example, in the United Kingdom—*[Interruption.]* Aren't iPads useful! The BIS tells us that on the trajectory we inherited from Labour, our national debt would have reached 500% of gross domestic product by 2040. By then our debt interest payments would have been one quarter—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is using his iPad very well, but I hope that he will come to Third Reading, which he should be mentioning.

Steve Baker: The financial context now is quite different from that in previous years. If the Government were not to address the pensions crisis within a realistic financial context, we would have a financial catastrophe. We would find ourselves, by 2040, attempting to spend one quarter of GDP on debt interest. It would be catastrophic—and much as my heart goes out to those ladies who I wish were not being affected by the Bill, because of the financial position in which we find ourselves I shall, of course, support the Government.

9.52 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Pensions are one of the great challenges of our age, so it is pleasing that we have been able to adopt a cross-party approach. It was begun by the previous Government, who set up the Turner review, and has been taken forward by this Government in, by and large, a sensible way—although there are areas of great concern.

Auto-enrolment is a positive development that, judging by speeches from across the House, is supported widely by Members on both sides. It will provide protection for people in their old age, and is a good thing. However, it is unfortunate that the Bill, as currently constructed, will hit young people and agency workers by putting in place a waiting period that means that they will not get all the entitlements that they should do early in their pension-building life. It is even more unfortunate that women aged 56 to 58 will be significantly penalised in a way that fails any test of fairness that the House, or anybody outside it, might apply.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does my hon. Friend agree that Government Members, in trying to defend the Bill as it now stands—with the Government's changes—are trying to pass off an improvement as a solution? They are trying to present a mitigation of the scale of an injustice as justice itself. Those of us who will be voting against the Bill on Third Reading do not believe that we have an acceptable casualty level among the women he is talking about, or that they were selected fairly or necessarily.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend makes the point clearly and soundly. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) made it absolutely clear this evening how unfair this Bill still is, and why anyone with any sense of justice and fairness should vote against it. It is outrageous for the Government to come here this evening with a mealy-mouthed effort to satisfy the women up and down this country. I urge all Members of this House to vote against the Bill.

9.55 pm

Yasmin Qureshi: The Opposition and Government agree on many things in the pensions debate. It was the previous Labour Government who introduced the Turner commission that looked into the ageing population and the need to sort out pensions, but that is not to say that a certain group of women—about 500,000 of them—should be penalised. *[Interruption.]* Government Members are smiling and talking, but we are talking about 500,000 women who will be drastically affected by the pension cuts. Everybody talks about how we do not have enough money, but the Government have found tens of billions of pounds for quantitative easing, and they can waste £3 billion on the unnecessary transformation or reorganisation of the NHS, and yet they find it difficult to find money for those ladies.

The Labour Government also wanted to introduce auto-enrolment, but under our proposals many more people would have benefited through enrolling automatically at £5,000; now the figure is £7,475, which means that 600,000 people will not be able to enrol automatically in a pension scheme, which again will hit women disproportionately. The Government have indicated that the rise is in line with income tax, but we know that in the next few years or so the increase will continue, which will exclude 1.5 million to 2 million people, as compared with the Labour party's original plan. The Government have also introduced a three-month waiting period before auto-enrolment, which they predict will result in 500,000 fewer people being automatically enrolled in a pension scheme. We estimate that each person will have about 11 different employers overall. I know that it is very late—there are only three minutes to go—but in light of what has happened and the fact that 500,000 women will be affected, along with 600,000 people who will be affected by the changes in auto-enrolment, I would urge the Government to reconsider.

Hon. Members have claimed that the Labour party did nothing about pensions when it was in power, but we should remember that in 1997, after years of Conservative government, the biggest challenge that we faced was tackling pensioner poverty and improving older people's quality of life. Between 1979 and 1997, the state pension declined from 20% of average male earnings to 14%. In 1997, 29% of our pensioners were living in poverty, which was absolutely disgraceful. Between 1997 and 2010, Labour made huge achievements, of which we are proud. Average gross pensioner income increased by more than 40% in real terms, ahead of the growth in average earnings. More than 1 million people were lifted out of poverty, with no pensioner living on less than £130 a week, compared with £69 a week in 1997.

The winter fuel allowance, free off-peak travel on local buses for 11 million people over 60, free TV licences for the over-75s and an increased threshold to ensure that 60% of pensioners pay no tax at all have made a difference. Those policies cost money, and of course money was spent, but this Government might remember that, when they were in opposition, they agreed to all Labour's expenditure plans. For them now to turn round and say that they did not know what was going to happen, or that they did not know how much money there was in the Treasury, is completely wrong. The coalition agreement stated that there would be cross-party consensus on this matter, and at that point, the Government knew exactly what the state of the finances was. At the last minute, however, those promises have been reneged on, and they are not the only ones—

10 pm

Debate interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E), That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 287, Noes 242.

Division No. 368] **[10 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Mr David
Andrew, Stuart
Arbuthnot, rh Mr James
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Steve
Baldry, Tony
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Bingham, Andrew
Binley, Mr Brian
Birtwistle, Gordon
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Mr Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brake, rh Tom
Bray, Angie
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brooke, Annette
Bruce, Fiona
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Buckland, Mr Robert
Burley, Mr Aidan
Burns, Conor
Burrowes, Mr David
Burstow, Paul
Burt, Lorely
Byles, Dan
Cable, rh Vince
Cairns, Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cash, Mr William
Chope, Mr Christopher
Clappison, Mr James
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colvile, Oliver
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crockart, Mike
Davey, Mr Edward
Davies, David T. C.
(Monmouth)
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dorrell, rh Mr Stephen
Dorries, Nadine
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael

Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Jonathan
Evennett, Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Farron, Tim
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fullbrook, Lorraine
Fuller, Richard
Gale, Mr Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gilbert, Stephen
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, Robert
Hames, Duncan
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Matthew
Hands, Greg
Harper, Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, Mr John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Mr David
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hemming, John
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoban, Mr Mark
Hollingbery, George
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, Mr Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, rh Simon
Huhne, rh Chris
Hunter, Mark
Huppert, Dr Julian
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, Sajid
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kelly, Chris
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Mr Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Jessica
Leech, Mr John
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Mr Edward
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lumley, Karen
Macleod, Mary
Main, Mrs Anne
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Esther
Mensch, Louise
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Patrick
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Anne
Moore, rh Michael
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Mosley, Stephen
Mowat, David
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr Brooks
Newton, Sarah
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
O'Brien, Mr Stephen
Ollerenshaw, Eric
Opperman, Guy
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, rh Mr James
Parish, Neil
Patel, Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Raab, Mr Dominic
Reckless, Mark
Redwood, rh Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Jacob
Reevell, Simon
Reid, Mr Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, rh Mr Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Amber
Russell, Bob
Rutley, David
Sanders, Mr Adrian
Sandys, Laura
Scott, Mr Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Miss Chloe
Smith, Henry
Soames, rh Nicholas
Soubry, Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mr Mark
Stanley, rh Sir John
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Mr Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sturdy, Julian
Swales, Ian
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Timpson, Mr Edward
Tomlinson, Justin
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Uppal, Paul
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Ward, Mr David
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Wharton, James
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, rh Mr David
Williams, Mr Mark
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williamson, Gavin
Willott, Jenny
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wright, Jeremy
Wright, Simon
Young, rh Sir George
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stephen Crabb and
James Duddridge

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bain, Mr William
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barron, rh Mr Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Dame Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blears, rh Hazel
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blunkett, rh Mr David
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Brown, Mr Russell
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Campbell, Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Mrs Jenny
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curran, Margaret
Danczuk, Simon
Darling, rh Mr Alistair
David, Mr Wayne
Davidson, Mr Ian
Davies, Geraint
De Piero, Gloria
Dobbin, Jim

Docherty, Thomas
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donohoe, Mr Brian H.
Doran, Mr Frank
Dowd, Jim
Doyle, Gemma
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Engel, Natascha
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Field, rh Mr Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Gilmore, Sheila
Glindon, Mrs Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goggins, rh Paul
Goodman, Helen
Greatrex, Tom
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr Peter
Hamilton, Mr David
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr Tom
Havard, Mr Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Heyes, David
Hillier, Meg
Hilling, Julie
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr Jim
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs Siân C.
Jamieson, Cathy
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leslie, Chris
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, rh Mr Elfyn
Long, Naomi
Love, Mr Andrew
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
MacShane, rh Mr Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mann, John
Marsden, Mr Gordon
McCabe, Steve
McCann, Mr Michael
McCarthy, Kerry
McClymont, Gregg
McCrea, Dr William
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McGovern, Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs Anne
McKechin, Ann
McKenzie, Mr Iain
McKinnell, Catherine
Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Morden, Jessica
Morrice, Graeme *(Livingston)*
Morris, Grahame M. *(Easington)*
Mudie, Mr George
Munn, Meg
Murphy, rh Mr Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Nash, Pamela
O'Donnell, Fiona
Onwurah, Chi
Osborne, Sandra
Paisley, Ian
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Raynsford, rh Mr Nick
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Riordan, Mrs Linda
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Roy, Mr Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Sarwar, Anas
Seabeck, Alison
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Shuker, Gavin
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Mr Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Straw, rh Mr Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walley, Joan
Watson, Mr Tom
Watts, Mr Dave
Weir, Mr Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Woodward, rh Mr Shaun
Wright, David
Wright, Mr Iain

Tellers for the Noes:
Yvonne Fovargue and
Nic Dakin

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Business without Debate

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

MIGRATION, MOBILITY AND SECURITY

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 10784/11, a Commission Communication: A dialogue for migration, mobility and security with the Southern Mediterranean countries; and supports the Government's aim of working with other Member States to strengthen practical co-operation with Southern Mediterranean States on migration.—*(Jeremy Wright.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Recognition of Palestine as an Independent State

10.16 pm

Hugh Bayley (York Central) (Lab): I wish to present to the House the following petition, which was signed by Terry Gallogly of Lowther court in York and supported by a further 79 people who live in the city I represent.

The petition states:

The Petition of York Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the people of York,

Declares that the Petitioners note that since 1993 the Palestinian Authority has been involved in fruitless negotiations that have still not resulted in freedom; that the number of Israeli settlers living illegally on Palestinian territory has more than doubled, large areas of land have been stolen, over 600 checkpoints prevent freedom of movement to schools and hospitals, and a wall, declared illegal by an international court 7 years ago, continues to be built; and that this September, with no end to the Occupation in sight, and with the support of many countries, the Palestinian Authority will apply to the United Nations for recognition of Palestine as an independent state.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to formally recognise the right of the Palestinian people for self-determination and the right of Palestinian

[Hugh Bayley]

refugees to be able to return in freedom to their homes, and calls on the Government to work urgently for just solution in the region.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000964]

Proposed Cuts to BBC Radio Merseyside

10.18 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition from radio listeners throughout Merseyside. The petition was collected online and on the streets of Liverpool. I am sure that many more people would have liked to have signed it, but time is of the essence, which is why I am submitting it today. Nevertheless, there are in the region of 2,000 signatories to the petition, along with many testimonials.

The petition states:

The Petition of listeners to BBC Radio Merseyside,

Declares that the Petitioners oppose the 20% cut to BBC Radio Merseyside's budget proposed by the BBC management; that the Petitioners note that BBC Radio Merseyside is the most listened to of the BBC's 39 local radio stations outside of London with over 300,000 listeners who tune in for an average of 16.2 hours per week to popular programmes such as the Roger Phillips Show and the Billy Butler Show; further note that there are more staff at Radio 4 who work on the You and Yours programme than the whole of the current team of BBC Radio Merseyside; and that the Petitioners believe any efficiency savings should be fairly distributed, protecting local services and jobs where possible, in order to guarantee quality of programming which remains locally relevant and to preserve a service that is depended on by millions of listeners up and down the country, rather than maintaining the budgets of bigger channels and national radio stations.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the BBC to reconsider its cuts to BBC local radio.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000965]

Marine Management Organisation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(James Duddridge.)*

10.20 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue of great concern to my constituency and many maritime constituencies around our shores. The UK marine area covers an area three and a half times the UK land mass. It is rich in marine life and natural resources, which form the basis of human economic activities estimated to be worth £46 billion in 2005-06. Some of those pose a risk to the integrity of marine ecosystems, with impacts growing because of pressures such as large-scale marine renewable energy developments. Current activities have resulted in a crowded marine area, including licensed developments and areas of high fishing effort. Concerns over the degradation of the marine environment have led to a range of new policies, culminating in legislation and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

The most significant aspect of that Act is the introduction of marine planning: a framework for decisions on marine activities aimed at reducing user conflict and encouraging an "ecosystem-based approach". Planning, as described in the Act, aims to promote economic activity, as well as to integrate environmental protection into decision making. I have read the *Hansard* record of the Committee stage of that Bill and know that the then Minister was keen to ensure that the Bill achieved the right balance between sustainable development and environmental protection.

The Marine Management Organisation was created as the main delivery agency for the new planning and licensing regime, but Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee have the main role in the pre-designation of marine protection areas. I have met its chairman and chief executive, who are trying to deliver the aims of their organisation. All the comments I am about to make relate not to their performance in managing the organisation, but rather to the structure of the processes they have inherited.

The key challenge facing the marine planning system that I am experiencing in the port of Falmouth and the Carrick Roads is resolving the inevitable conflicts between policy objectives to ensure the integration of the social, economic and environmental needs of the area. Given the limited amount of time available to me, I will summarise the area briefly. It is the third largest natural harbour in the world; home of the last commercial oyster fishing fleet under sail in Europe; host to a thriving ship repair business; host to the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service fleet; home to world-class super-yacht builders Pendennis; and home to a range of marine renewable businesses. It is also a centre of world-class yachting and sailing, including the home base of British Olympic sailor Ben Ainslie. It has a special area of conservation and areas of sites of special scientific interest. Having grown up there, I can testify to the huge improvements that have been made to the quality of water and the natural environment, which all Falmouthians very much value.

All concerned with the new marine planning process acknowledge the challenges involved. Putting 25% of England's marine environment under "protection" in a relatively short time, given the severely resource-constrained situation the Government find themselves in, is deeply concerning. The uncertainties in planning decisions as a result of knowledge gaps, and sometimes competing scientific evidence is of particular concern. Effective marine management requires sound evidence and monitoring. A Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science report in 2010 entitled "Marine Survey Needs to Underpin Defra Policy" identifies a shortage of data necessary for marine planning. It also states that much of the evidence to be used in designation is subject to a medium or low level of confidence.

About 10% of the UK continental shelf is currently mapped in detail by survey or observation. To fill gaps, projects such as UKSeaMap produce broad-scale predictive habitat maps based on best available data, but confidence in some of the designations is as low as 20%. Direct mapping is expensive: the cost is estimated to be £210 million over seven years to map the rest of the UK's regional seas to scales relevant to marine habitats, and there are limited funds to undertake such surveys.

Given the emphasis on evidence-based policy needing to be based on the best possible science, I want the Minister to consider the following recommendations about the guidance the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs gives to the MMO, which has the job of licensing activity in the marine environment, such as dredging, as well as establishing a network of marine protected areas, include marine conservation zones and reference sites. To undertake that work, the MMO is using the DEFRA-produced "A description of the marine planning system for England". That is quite a general document and it would be relatively straightforward for the Minister to issue additional guidance to bring in the changes I recommend, which would not need any primary legislation.

The additional guidance I want the Minister to consider stems from the need to access the broadest and best possible evidence base for appropriate decisions to be taken. As the Minister is aware, Natural England and the JNCC are the Government's statutory nature conservation advisers in the English and UK offshore marine area, yet there is a wealth of knowledge in coastal communities, academic institutions around the UK and even internationally that I believe should be used in addition to the expertise of those organisations. Marine science is a fast-growing academic discipline and the MMO should be enabled to extend the range of organisations and people that can provide scientific evidence to enable its independent decision making. The quality of evidence should be paramount, whether or not it comes from Natural England or the JNCC. Of course, any organisation or person would have to demonstrate their ability to carry out the task and their work should be open to scrutiny and challenge. I believe their evidence should be considered on a level playing field and on equal terms with that of Natural England and the JNCC.

I also want the Minister to consider extending the limited appeals system. Generally speaking, the terrestrial planning system does not extend below the low tide mark, so the normal planning appeals process does not apply. The 2009 Act does not appear to set out an equivalent appeals process for planning decisions, although it does allow for one to be set out by regulations under section 37 for appeals against licensing decisions. I note the Department of Energy and Climate Change and DEFRA's recent consultation on licensing under part 4, including appeals on decisions.

The marine planning system for England March 2011 document states in paragraph 5.61 that appeals against the refusal of terrestrial planning permission and inquiries are dealt with by the Planning Inspectorate and it goes on to say that the Planning Inspectorate could be involved in independent investigations within the marine planning system. If an independent investigation is required, an investigator will be appointed to provide advice and recommendations on how issues may be resolved and plans may be improved. The final format that the investigation will take is decided by the Secretary of State on the advice of the MMO. It is essential that these powers should be made available in the predetermination stage of marine protection designations as well as in relation to decisions the MMO will make post-designation in the management of marine protected areas.

The potential economic and social impact of designation of marine protected areas on coastal communities is so significant that it demands an appropriate appeals process. Decisions of such magnitude would not be made on the land without an appropriate appeals process. With the recent publication of the list of potential sites, there has been a huge outcry in my constituency at the potential designation of part of the Fal estuary as a marine protected area and a reference site.

Falmouth town council is united in strongly opposing the plans, stating that

> "the proposal…threatens 350 years of history and shipping power in this port".

The impact of the designation upon the recreational use of the Fal estuary has also aroused anger. Referring to the effect of the designation on a long and proud history of sailing boat racing on the Fal, Falmouth race officer Walter Amos has stated:

> "The proposal would put an end to 150 years of tradition, cause enormous resentment, and have considerable economic consequences."

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a strong case, particularly regarding reference sites. The Minister and I served our time on the Bill that became the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, and what my hon. Friend says is absolutely right: what we need in relation to reference sites is consultation and the opportunity for appeals, as with my constituency and the Cape Bank reference site. Low-impact fishing takes place there at the moment, but that would be stopped, with the unintended consequence of discouraging the very type of fishing that I should have thought the Act was intended to protect.

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for that very helpful intervention.

Richard Gates, the Falmouth town centre manager, has added his voice to the chorus of local residents opposing the plans, commenting:

> "We live in a beautiful part of the country and certainly are very environmentally aware but this cannot be at the detriment of people's livelihoods and leisure when many people are working so hard to develop the area".

I am sure that Falmouth and, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) has pointed out, other parts of Cornwall are not the only coastal

[Sarah Newton]

communities that feel that the current recommended sites for marine protected areas are inappropriate because they fail to meet the fundamental aim of creating areas that strike the right balance between sustainable economic, social and environmental protection.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): My hon. Friend's description of her beautiful constituency could be substituted for mine, with Aldeburgh and the River Alde. Is it not the case that constituents feel that designations are being slapped on top of existing special protection areas simply because the data are available, rather than other parts of the coast being sought that could easily fulfil the criteria for marine conservation zones?

Sarah Newton: I am very grateful for those comments. My hon. Friend anticipates a point that I was going to make but now do not need to make. I think that issue is a real problem.

Perhaps it is not surprising that this has happened because the lead agencies tasked with drawing up the list of potential sites, the JNCC and Natural England, have as their primary purpose environmental protection and conservation. What is not part of their remit is what the Act clearly set out to achieve—balancing the social, economic and environmental needs of communities.

I appreciate that the Minister has inherited the current process and would not have designed one that led to the current situation, where there is so much genuine outrage and concern, but that is where we are today. It is a matter of great importance to coastal communities that measures are urgently taken to enable greater use of all the available evidence base by decision makers, rather than their relying almost entirely on Natural England and the JNCC. An open, transparent appeals process for both pre and post-designation decision making needs to be established urgently.

Given that the deadline for the establishment of the marine protected areas sites is 2012 and that the sites are being consulted on as we speak, I hope the Minister can reassure me that he will consider these recommendations so that the implementation of the very worthy aims of the Act command the respect of coastal communities. It is vital that people who might be adversely affected by the implementation of the Act are thoroughly involved, which they have not been so far. Making the new planning system work depends on building a consensus and support that can be achieved only if all concerned have confidence in the system that is used to reach conclusions. Sadly, that is very much missing at the moment. Politicians are elected to use their judgment and are democratically accountable. I hope that the Minister can reassure us tonight that he will exercise his judgment and democratic accountability to ensure that there is a common-sense approach to marine planning.

10.34 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) on securing the debate and thank her for allowing me to participate in it. I am well aware that the setting up of the MMO in the previous Parliament was a contentious issue that caused frustration in my constituency.

My predecessor fought valiantly to convince her own Labour Front-Bench team in DEFRA that the MMO should be located in the south-west. After all, the peninsula has 30% of the UK's coastline and Plymouth is a global player with the Royal Navy, the Plymouth Marine Laboratory, Plymouth university, the Marine Biological Association, the Sir Alister Hardy Foundation for Ocean Science and the National Marine Aquarium all based in my Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport constituency. Plymouth is a fishing port as well. I suspect that the decision to locate the MMO in Newcastle was a political one, aimed at satisfying Labour Members of Parliament in the north. With only three Labour Members of Parliament in Devon and Cornwall by 2005, I am afraid my predecessor's views were rather disregarded.

I suspect that things have gone too far and that it would be inappropriate to move the MMO to Plymouth or the south-west, especially in the present financial climate when we have to be very careful with taxpayers' money. We need to ensure that money is spent wisely. However, will my hon. Friend the Minister consider whether a small satellite office might be set up in Plymouth, or if some funding could be given to the university to host a few officials who could liaise with the MMO and make sure that the south-west is well represented?

In the short time available to me, I want to welcome the MMO's commitment to evidence-based and transparent decision making. I welcome the proposals to develop Falmouth port, as this will deliver a cluster approach to economic development in the south-west. Like Plymouth, it is of regional economic significance and could potentially be a key test of the MMO's commitment to sustainable development, but I seek an assurance from the Minister that the MMO will work with its statutory conservation advisers to scrutinise the quality of evidence and ensure that robust processes are in place.

I was concerned to see a recent independent review of Natural England's quality assurance processes that outlined a number of significant issues in relation to advice on the marine environment. The review contained a range of recommendations so that Natural England is brought into line with recognised good practice. Will the Minister assure the House that Natural England is committed to working with the MMO to provide high quality advice that is subject to independent peer review and scrutiny?

The way we manage our seas is becoming increasingly important as they become a barometer for global warming. If they want to carry all interested parties and users of the seas with them, Ministers will need to ensure that there is a significant amount of public consultation.

10.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) on securing the debate on such an important issue for her constituents. I thank other hon. Members for their contributions.

The Marine Management Organisation was created just 18 months ago, with cross-party support. As a non-departmental public body, it carries out its function with technical expertise, impartiality and transparency, and at arm's length from Ministers, but it is accountable to both Ministers and Parliament. At the outset, I pay tribute to the MMO and to its staff. Its remit is very diverse. It continues to mature and is tackling a range of challenging issues. It manages our fisheries; it is delivering marine planning; it is working with others to create and manage a network of marine protected areas and to carry out marine licensing. Within its broad remit, the MMO is required to manage its activities with the objective of making a contribution to sustainable development, in a consistent and co-ordinated manner and taking account of all relevant facts and matters.

The MMO's decisions should be impartial and based on best available evidence, taking into account the potential benefits and anticipated adverse impacts. It also needs to ensure that its decisions comply with statutory requirements under UK and EU legislation and are consistent with our international obligations. All that sounds straightforward in theory, but the decisions that the MMO has to make, whether about opening and closing fisheries, licensing construction or applications to the European fisheries fund have real-world impacts and directly affect people's livelihoods, something that I believe the MMO is acutely aware of. The MMO will never be able to please all the people all the time, and decisions will sometimes adversely affect some more than others, but for that reason the MMO stresses the importance of transparency and impartiality. The MMO has been exemplary in ensuring that the information it bases its decisions on is publicly available, and it is helpful for people to be able to see how it makes its decisions, particularly when they are relatively controversial.

One cornerstone of the 2009 Act was to introduce a streamlined licensing system and marine planning in order to contribute to the sustainable development of our seas. That streamlined licensing system was introduced in April, the first marine plans will be in place in 2013 and, to guide the MMO, DEFRA has produced statutory guidance on sustainable development. It refers to the UK marine policy statement, which was adopted in March as the framework for planning and decision making in the marine environment in order to ensure a consistent approach throughout the UK and to contribute to sustainable development.

At the same time, DEFRA produced the description for the marine planning process in England so that the MMO could take it forward and produce subsequent guidance on how marine planning will work, and it is an absolute priority of this Government to ensure that, when we view our seas, we do so holistically. For too long we have looked down the silos of fisheries, conservation or marine licensing, but now, at last, we are developing the means to look at the marine environment as a whole. That is long overdue, and it will assist the constituents of my hon. Friends and others, who at the moment have to follow an entirely application-led process. Marine planning, like terrestrial planning, will be a great advantage to them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman refers to involvement with other parts of the United Kingdom, and there is an impact on the devolved Administrations of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, because they have responsibility for fishing, so can he confirm that he will consult the devolved Administrations to ensure that there is a uniform approach to fishing?

Richard Benyon: I make it my business to confer with my devolved colleagues regularly, and I will do so on Thursday and Friday in Luxembourg and with the Northern Ireland Minister and other devolved Ministers in Newcastle in the very near future. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I make it my business to ensure that we, as a UK group of Ministers, talk together and recognise that we cannot look at our seas just in terms of the countries that make up the United Kingdom; we have to look at them holistically.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth mentioned the appeals process, and one important feature of the new licensing system is the introduction of just such a process. An applicant for a marine licence will be able to appeal against a decision made by the licensing authority on their application. That includes a decision not to grant a licence, conditions attached to a licence or the length of a licence, and the Planning Inspectorate—PINS—will manage and decide appeals against licensing decisions made by the licensing authority.

We have closely aligned our processes to those for terrestrial planning appeals, as we expect there to be benefits in developing a system that is consistent with current practice. For example, a familiar process should be easier for PINS to implement and for appellants to understand and follow.

Similarly, for marine planning, as my hon. Friend said, there will be the option for independent investigations of a marine plan, and PINS will carry out those, too. Should an independent investigation be needed, it will take place after the consultation on a proposed marine plan and before adoption by the Secretary of State.

Clarity, transparency and the involvement of as many stakeholders and communities as possible are important in marine planning and licensing. Similarly, although the MMO relies on advice from Natural England and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee as statutory consultees when making many of its decisions, it none the less draws on a wider evidence base in delivering its work. Naturally, this includes research commissioned by DEFRA and carried out by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and many other expert organisations, as well as studies commissioned directly by the MMO.

Indeed, the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) is a well-known international hub of expertise in marine science, and precisely those resources are available to and used by the MMO for the evidence that it needs. It is essential that it should be able to have access to the best information available, including information submitted during public consultations. I can give my hon. Friends the absolute assurance that, in our reviews of the performance of the MMO, we will ensure that it is taking all the best evidence available and is not only listening to the statutory conservation bodies but registering a serious attempt to widen its reach in terms of the advice it receives.

My hon. Friend may also wish for some clarification of the marine conservation zone process. The identification of MCZs has been stakeholder-led operation from the outset, managed by the statutory nature conservation bodies, Natural England and the JNCC. The statutory nature conservation bodies established four regional MCZ projects—Balanced Seas, Finding Sanctuary, Net Gain and the Irish sea conservation zones—and these

[Richard Benyon]

provided advice about which MCZs should be brought forward. I can tell hon. Members, if they have not witnessed it, that it has been a tortuous process with many hours of work, and it has brought forward some suggestions at this stage.

Each project established stakeholder groups made up of a variety of key interested parties in their regions to examine the evidence and put forward site recommendations and associated impact assessments. To that end, it is the stakeholders who have been responsible for developing the recommendations on location, conservation objectives and management measures options of any MCZs in their region, and they have had a real opportunity to shape and influence the decisions that the Government will make.

On 8 September, the regional MCZ projects submitted their final MCZ recommendations to the independent Science Advisory Panel and the statutory nature conservation bodies for review. In total, there are 127 recommended MCZ sites. Across all four projects, over 2,500 interviews were conducted with stakeholders, and detailed discussions took place during the course of 155 stakeholder meetings. Over 1 million individuals' interests have been represented through the MCZ stakeholder groups. Once the advice from the panel and the statutory nature conservation bodies is received, Ministers—I stress, Ministers themselves—will examine all the evidence before deciding which sites to put forward for public consultation. The public consultation will be yet another opportunity for stakeholders to present their views on proposals and for any further new evidence to be submitted. Only after all this evidence has been collated and reviewed will Ministers designate MCZs.

I conclude by reiterating the scale of the challenge facing the MMO and Ministers as we seek to grapple with exceedingly complex issues that, as my hon. Friends have eloquently noted, stir a great deal of interest and passion around coastal Britain. I look forward to continuing that vigorous discussion as we move forward through the process of designating marine conservation zones and managing our vital marine resources.

Question put and agreed to.

10.48 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 19 October 2011

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Dissident Groups

1. **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the threat from dissident groups. [74403]

3. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the threat posed by terrorist groups in Northern Ireland. [74405]

11. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of dissident activity in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [74414]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Owen Paterson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Questions 1, 3, 8 and 11 together.

The threat level in Northern Ireland remains at severe, and we continue to work closely with our partners in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government to counter that threat. We are not complacent, and this Government remain totally committed to ensuring that the Chief Constable has the necessary resources to deal with the threat posed by those terrorist groups.

Mr Hanson: Does the Secretary of State welcome the many hundreds of people who came out in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) last week to protest against the bombing for the second time of the city of culture office in the city of Derry? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that they represent the true voice of Northern Ireland, and will he work with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that nothing deflects from the city of culture programme taking place in Derry?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for this question and entirely endorse his comments. It is quite extraordinary, when we think of how that city is coming together, united behind the city of culture programme, which is coming along soon, that that tiny number of unrepresentative people could do such a crazily reckless thing. The demonstration of people coming out on to the street shows the support that exists for the settlement and for the PSNI, and that was endorsed this morning in my conversation with the Northern Ireland Justice Minister, Mr David Ford.

Jack Lopresti: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the recent unanimous support from all parts of the Northern Ireland Assembly for the Police Service of Northern Ireland in dealing with the dissident threat sends a clear message that those organisations will not succeed?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, which follows on from what I have just said. He is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that we now have a police service that is wholly accountable to a democratically elected Justice Minister and a democratically elected Policing Board, on which all parties sit.

Mr Speaker: Mr Patrick Mercer. Not here.

Diana Johnson: Is the security situation worse or better than it was a year ago?

Mr Paterson: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for that question, and as she knows we have put in very significant extra resources, with £200 million going in over the next four years, backed by the Executive putting in a further £45 million. In discussions with the PSNI, we are determined to bear down on those groups, which are dangerous, and we are not complacent about them.

To answer the hon. Lady's question directly, we have slowed down the increase in such activity which we saw when we came into office, but there is definitely more work to do, and none of us should underestimate the danger that that small number of people represent not just to the police, but to people going about their everyday business.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I endorse what the Secretary of State has already said about the lack of support from all parts for dissident groups in Northern Ireland, but on combating the dissident threat, what is he doing to strike at their source of funding and their raising of finances, particularly through illicit fuel laundering and other sources of revenue? What is happening to tackle that?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that question, because it gives me an opportunity to make clear to the House the remarkable successes that the PSNI has pulled off, stopping fuel laundering and making some very significant arrests on illegal cigarettes. We should all remember the extraordinary level of co-operation that we now have between the PSNI and the Garda, working both sides of the border, because such activity is not restricted to the north.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the Secretary of State's answer, but he will know that, as well as finance helping the dissident terrorists, one thing on which such people thrive is the hope that they are dictating the Government's agenda. On that point, they have taken great comfort and solace from the fact that the Ministry of Defence decided not to allow a homecoming parade for the Royal Irish and the Irish Guards in Belfast. Will he continue his efforts and speak to the MOD about that issue, which has gone down very badly in all quarters of Northern Ireland, especially when such parades have been allowed elsewhere throughout the Province? Will he have a word with the Ministry of Defence on that?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful for that question, too, because I can now clarify that I have regular discussions with the Ministry of Defence. I went to Balmoral showground and I was there with the First Minister when the Royal Irish Regiment and the Irish Guards put on a wonderful demonstration and were warmly welcomed by a large number of people. That was agreed by the Ministry of Defence with the city council.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Recently there have been two bombs found in south Belfast, a bomb found in Bradbury place, and a pipe bomb left on the windowsill of a Polish couple on an estate in Antrim. These are in addition to the other bombs and outrages of which the Secretary of State will be aware. This is totally unacceptable. People have a right to live without fear and intimidation in any community. It is welcome that these attacks have been widely condemned as the work of a very small number of people who seem determined to turn the clock back. What is the latest assessment that the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Executive have made about the dissidents' capabilities, and what steps have they agreed to take to combat their activities?

Mr Paterson: I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman to his first Northern Ireland questions. As I said in the statement last week, Northern Ireland would not have progressed to where it has without the extremely close co-operation of the main political parties, not just in the UK but in Dublin and Washington. I very much look forward to working with him and wish him well in his difficult role.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, we work extremely closely with the Justice Minister, David Ford, and, as I have already said, we work very closely with the authorities in Dublin, and our assessment is that these groups are still dangerous. He has rightly cited a number of recent incidents which are absolutely outrageous and which are wholly exceptional. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland want to grab this wonderful opportunity to move Northern Ireland on, and so we will guarantee to work extremely closely with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Justice Minister, and the Garda in Dublin.

Vernon Coaker: I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words. I will certainly try to work with him and others for the good of the people of Northern Ireland.

What plans does the Secretary of State have to use his role in working with Northern Ireland ministerial colleagues to promote Londonderry/Derry as the UK city of culture 2013 both nationally and internationally? Is it not the case, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said, that one very powerful way of combating any dissident threat is to give a positive image of what the city and the whole of Northern Ireland can offer in terms of culture, and to give a true reflection of the people of Northern Ireland, in stark contrast to those who so recently caused outrage when they attacked the city of culture offices?

Mr Speaker: We now need to speed up. I call the Secretary of State.

Mr Paterson: I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question and totally endorse it. I was at the launch of the city of culture with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, but the key people there were the young people who put on the film and the soundtrack by Snow Patrol, which wowed the judges; Phil Redmond confirmed that it was the thing that really swung it. That is a complete celebration of everything good that is going on in that city, as was the opening of the bridge this year. The tiny number of crazy people putting bombs outside the offices are unrepresentative, and they will not succeed.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful. We will now move on with rather greater dispatch, I hope.

Legacy Issues

2. **Paul Murphy** (Torfaen) (Lab): What plans he has to publish his conclusions on legacy issues in Northern Ireland. [74404]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Owen Paterson): My right hon. Friend the Minister of State and I have been meeting a range of political parties and victims' groups to discuss the issue of dealing with the past. So far, we have not found consensus. While the Government have a role to play, the way forward on this matter must come from within Northern Ireland.

Paul Murphy: The Secretary of State is of course right that solutions must come from within Northern Ireland, but he will realise that there is now widespread opposition to his proposal for a semi-inquiry into the Pat Finucane case. Does he understand that by going ahead with his proposal, £1.5 million is likely to be wasted, and will he now rethink?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question, and I pay tribute to him, as I did last week in the statement. I am sorry that we disagree on this. He committed to a public inquiry, but he then passed the Inquiries Act 2005, which was the stumbling block. We inherited a complete impasse; this was going nowhere. We think that by accepting the conclusion of the Stevens inquiry, which is possibly the largest police inquiry in British history, and by having the family to Downing street for a fulsome apology, we can now concentrate on what is really important, which I raised with the family when I first met them—namely, to get to the truth as fast possible. That is why we have gone down this route of appointing a well-respected international lawyer and giving him very wide powers to get to the truth by December next year.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. However, given the political sensitivity surrounding legacy issues and the fact that the greatest legacy issue in Northern Ireland is the murder of Pat Finucane, will he reflect on the comments of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Dublin and of members of the Finucane family, and realise that this could undermine the very architecture of the Good Friday agreement? Will he now redress the situation and ensure that there is an independent judicial inquiry into—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must have time for the answers as well.

Mr Paterson: I am afraid that I simply do not agree. We inherited an impasse and have come up with a solution. I have talked to senior members of the Irish Government and I talked to the Tánaiste this week after he had seen the family. On this issue, sadly, we will simply disagree with them. We will not let this one issue undermine the extraordinarily good relations we have with the Republic, nor will we let it undermine the settlement. If the hon. Lady had been at Hillsborough last night and seen people from right across the community welcoming the President, she would have seen just how far Northern Ireland has moved on. We are all determined to keep that going.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): One legacy issue that has never been addressed is the role played by elements of the Republic of Ireland's Government in creating, financing, training and arming the Provisional IRA, and Dublin's shielding of the provos by refusing to co-operate fully with extradition. Does the Secretary of State accept that the families in Birmingham, Warrington, London, Aldershot and elsewhere deserve to see Enda Kenny step to the mark, acknowledge the failings of the southern Government and formally apologise for those killings?

Mr Paterson: I think that it is outside my remit. If the hon. Gentleman has questions that he would like to address to the Government of the Republic, he should write to them direct.

West Lothian Question

4. **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Deputy Prime Minister on the commission to consider the West Lothian question. [74406]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Hugo Swire): In September, the Government set out the steps that we are taking to establish a commission on the West Lothian question. Northern Ireland Office Ministers and officials will continue to have regular discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister and his office on this and a range of other issues.

Harriett Baldwin: The Minister will know that the West Lothian question is also known as the West Belfast question. Does he agree that it is important that the commission comes to a conclusion relatively quickly in order for steps to be taken to resolve this tricky constitutional issue before the next election?

Mr Swire: Yes, I believe—as do the Government, which is lucky—that we need this commission. I think that we will hear its terms of reference shortly. When it is set up, it should conclude quite quickly. No doubt my hon. Friend, who has campaigned assiduously on this matter, will wish to give the commission the benefit of her views.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that the creation of a two-tier Parliament here would be against the interests of the United Kingdom and the interests of Unionism throughout the United Kingdom? Does he further agree that if he were to proceed along the way of the West Lothian question, he would have to stand at that Dispatch Box and argue for double jobbing? Is that not against the interests of his Government?

Mr Swire: I think that the hon. Gentleman knows our views on double jobbing in relation to Northern Ireland. He will equally know of my view that everybody in this place is equal. I take a rather more positive view than he does. The Governments in Edinburgh and Cardiff and the Executive in Northern Ireland are up and running and functioning. I therefore believe that it is time we looked at how parliamentary business—the business of this House—can be done better to reflect a post-devolution United Kingdom. That is what the commission will look at. That should reinforce the strength of the Union—something in which he and I both believe.

Credit Unions

5. **Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): What discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on the regulation of credit unions in Northern Ireland. [74407]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Following discussions between Treasury Ministers and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Treasury and the Financial Services Authority published a joint consultation paper in August setting out proposals for the transfer of the regulation of Northern Ireland credit unions from DETI to the FSA on 31 March 2012. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There are far too many private conversations taking place in the Chamber, notably on the Opposition Benches. I would have thought that everybody would want to hear Mr Mark Durkan.

Mark Durkan: I thank the Minister for that reply. Tomorrow is international credit union day, and credit unions in Northern Ireland have been waiting for the change that he described for a long time so that they can offer their members a much greater range of services. Will he assure us that his work with Treasury Ministers will mean that the primary legislation will be adequate, the secondary legislation will follow fast and the transition arrangements will have a strong regional presence so that the credit unions can work with the new regulator to make a success of the new powers?

Mr Swire: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, and his predecessor John Hume, on championing the cause of credit unions for many years. There are 177 credit unions in Northern Ireland. They are part of the big society agenda, and we think they are great institutions. We want them to be able to expand and offer the services that credit unions in Great Britain currently can. He will agree that what is important during the change is that people with their money in those credit unions are properly protected. Like me, he will no doubt welcome the move to bring credit unions under the FSA or its successor, to protect them in a way that the Presbyterian Mutual Society savers were not protected.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman will surely remember that a well-crafted and consensual Labour Bill to address precisely this issue was presented to the House in the last Parliament and cruelly garrotted during the wash-up. Does he regret the actions of his party?

Mr Swire: I do not believe that the Labour party got everything wrong, just most things.

Air Passenger Duty

6. **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effect in Northern Ireland of changes to air passenger duty. [74409]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Owen Paterson): I have had regular discussions with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who came to Northern Ireland in June, heard at first hand from local businesses about the importance of the issue and became personally involved in resolving it. As a result he announced a cut in air passenger duty next month for all direct long-haul flights from airports in Northern Ireland.

Mr Hepburn: May I welcome yesterday's announcement and say how encouraging it is to other parts of the UK that think that particular tax is unfair? Will the Minister keep the House updated on the progress of the tax cut so that we may learn something and get a change in other parts of the UK?

Mr Paterson: I think the hon. Gentleman is asking me to stray into areas that are not my responsibility, but I pay tribute to him and his friends on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, who rapidly produced a report making a convincing case for the change. I would like to put on the record that it was a team effort. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State worked closely with the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster. The key person was the Chancellor, who saw the need for the change following his visit, took a real personal interest and pushed it through.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State, and indeed the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for taking swift and timely action on air passenger duty in Northern Ireland. When will the Secretary of State consider giving the Northern Ireland Assembly the power to set the level of corporation tax?

Mr Paterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for leading the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and for getting the report through. I announced two weeks ago that a ministerial working group would be set up, chaired by my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, and it hopes to meet in early November.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with members of the Northern Ireland Executive about the devolution of taxes other than corporation tax to Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: Order. We need particular reference to the importance of the air passenger duty. I am sure the hon. Gentleman meant to mention that.

Mr Paterson: I discussed air passenger duty with members of the Executive, namely the First Minister and the acting Deputy First Minister, yesterday, and I have discussed corporation tax. I have not discussed the devolution of any other taxes.

Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): With respect to the devolution of air passenger duty, will the Secretary of State be pressing for a swift timetable to take that forward? Will he also consider other double-duty taxations caused by people having to travel through GB airports?

Mr Paterson: My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary made a statement yesterday confirming that from 1 November the long-haul rate will be reduced. I hope to see that followed through swiftly by the Treasury, which is working closely with Executive Ministers so that this issue can be devolved as soon as possible.

Donations (Political Parties)

7. **Thomas Docherty** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with political parties in Northern Ireland on the law relating to donations to such parties. [74410]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Hugo Swire): It is clear from my discussions with the political parties in Northern Ireland that, like us, they want greater transparency over donations and loans. We will legislate to deliver this as soon as we can.

Thomas Docherty: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. He will appreciate the deep unease on both sides of this House about the continuing special measures required in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister spell out exactly when he proposes to legislate on this issue and when Sinn Fein will no longer get their special Short money?

Mr Swire: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have reluctantly extended the current arrangements to 2013 and hope to return to the House on this matter before then. I point out to him that Sinn Fein is subject to the same requirement as all other parties, and donations of more than £7,500 must be reported to the Electoral Commission. We want to move to a period of full transparency, but the time is not yet right. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must come to order. The next questioner is a former Northern Ireland Minister and I trust that the House will want to hear him.

Aviation (Economic Development)

9. **Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on the contribution of aviation to economic development. [74412]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Hugo Swire): I am in regular contact with Executive Ministers about air routes and fully understand the importance of the aviation industry to Northern Ireland, one of whose main companies, Bombardier Aerospace, I shall be seeing again shortly.

Paul Goggins: May I also welcome the Government's decision to reduce air passenger duty on long-haul flights? This creates a new anomaly, of course, whereby if someone pays tax on a return flight from Belfast to New York they will pay less tax than they would on a return flight to Manchester. Given the importance of regional routes to the Northern Ireland economy, will the Minister press the Chancellor, who is sitting very close to him, for a lower rate of duty on flights between Belfast and regional airports in the UK?

Mr Swire: We have been pressing the Chancellor on quite a lot of things recently and I am not sure we want to press him much more. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, Northern Ireland shares a land border and the flights from Dublin were cheaper—that was the problem. We are most grateful to the Treasury for recognising the anomaly of the transatlantic Belfast route, and any other airlines that are listening in might wish to take advantage of that, because we want to grow air traffic to Northern Ireland as part of rebalancing the economy.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): We all agree with the recent announcement on the Continental Airlines transatlantic route. Will the Minister make himself available so that if other routes become possible from all three airports in Northern Ireland on the transatlantic scene he will be able to help deliver more progress?

Mr Swire: Yes, of course we will. The key is the transfer of APD to the Executive for this transatlantic route. An investigation into APD is going on in the Treasury and the hon. Gentleman might wish to make representations to it. As I have just said, we are very interested in growing air routes to Northern Ireland, and not least in growing more from Great Britain into Belfast or any other airport. We want more tourists, more businessmen and more economic growth.

Youth Unemployment

10. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on reducing youth unemployment in Northern Ireland. [74413]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Tackling youth unemployment is a key priority for the UK Government and Northern Ireland Ministers. The Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud, has visited Northern Ireland on two occasions and met the Social Development and Employment and Learning Ministers to discuss these very matters.

Nic Dakin: What additional support is the Secretary of State putting in place to reduce youth unemployment so that young people have a positive future in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swire: The hon. Gentleman has a long track record in youth issues. We are very concerned about them. This was a problem for the previous Government, of which he was not a member, in all fairness, and it continues to be a problem. The Executive are dealing with a number of issues to do with apprenticeships and youth learning and we will continue to support them in every way. It is critical, however, that Executive Ministers engage with Lord Freud on the whole proposed package of welfare reform.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best way to increase youth employment in Northern Ireland is to invest in apprenticeships and the university technical schools, which is happening elsewhere in the United Kingdom?

Mr Swire: My hon. Friend is right—that is certainly one way of increasing youth employment. There is youth unemployment in Northern Ireland as there is in Great Britain, but as I have pointed out, that problem bedevilled the previous Government as well as this one, and we take it very seriously. Most of the levers are in the hands—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the Minister of State is delivering a formidably eloquent answer, but unfortunately I cannot hear it. Would he address the House?

Mr Swire: At the risk of repeating myself, the levers are mostly in the hands of Stormont Executive Ministers, and I urge them to engage with Lord Freud and his ministerial colleagues in respect of the package of welfare reform, which will be important for Northern Ireland's future prosperity.

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the Northern Ireland Executive's decision to cap tuition fees at just over £3,000 and the boost that that provides to young people in Northern Ireland who seek to graduate from university?

Mr Swire: Those are quite properly matters for the Executive. I would point out, as the right hon. Gentleman is well aware, that that money must be found from within the Executive's existing budget.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [75290] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 October.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in remembering Rifleman Vijay Rai, from 2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles. He was a talented and dedicated soldier, and our deepest sympathies should be with his family and his friends. He was proud to be a Gurkha and it is at times such as these that we especially remember the deep debt of gratitude that we owe all those brave soldiers.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others and in addition to my duties in the House I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr Hepburn: I commend and share the views of the Prime Minister concerning our brave military personnel.

Is the Prime Minister aware that this year we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Jarrow march? Is it not wrong that even today people in this country live in fear of the dole and unemployment? The Government have been in for one year and already we are back to the 1980s. I ask him a simple question: will he support workers or sacrifice them?

The Prime Minister: I believe that we need to be supporting people and helping them back into work. As the hon. Gentleman says, we should commemorate the Jarrow march, and I notice that it has been commemorated this year. We have a challenge right across the country as we see the numbers of those employed in the public sector inevitably go down, which would be happening whoever was standing at this Dispatch Box. We have got to make sure that there are more jobs in the private sector.

It is worth while that in the north-east Nissan is creating 200 new jobs, Hitachi is creating up to 500 new jobs, the Lear Corporation is creating an extra 300 jobs, and BT is creating an extra 280 jobs, in South Shields. There are 500,000 more private sector jobs—new jobs—compared with the time of the last election, but I recognise that we need to do more. That is what the Work programme is all about.

Q15. [75304] **Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his joint declaration with the Canadian Prime Minister on ocean renewable energy? We need to ensure that we have growth in our economy. What does he think universities such as Plymouth, which has a very good reputation for marine science research, can do to help to ensure that we have that?

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend for his question, because a number of universities in our country—including Edinburgh, which I have visited—are leaders in marine renewable energy. My right hon. Friend the Energy and Climate Change Secretary yesterday announced that we will go ahead with renewables obligation certificates, ensuring that we boost that vital industry and attract jobs to this country for offshore wind and other renewable technologies.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to Rifleman Vijay Rai from 2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles? In joining the Army, he was following in a proud family tradition. He showed the utmost courage and bravery, and our deepest condolences are with his family and friends.

The revelations over the past week about what has been going on in the most sensitive Department at the heart of the Prime Minister's Government are deeply worrying. The former Defence Secretary had an unofficial adviser with access to top officials in the military and, indeed, in foreign Governments, who was funded by undeclared private donations solicited by him, yet the Prime Minister says that he and No. 10 knew nothing about these goings-on for 18 months. How did he allow this to happen?

The Prime Minister: First, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this is an important and serious issue, which is why I set up a full and proper inquiry by the Cabinet Secretary. He has produced his report, and it has been published in full. It is worth noting, however, that in this case the Secretary of State for Defence recognised that he had made a mistake, acknowledged that had broken the ministerial code and resigned. That was not something that always happened in the previous 13 years.

Edward Miliband: I have a piece of advice for the Prime Minister: this week of all weeks, show a bit of humility, eh? The truth is that we still do not know the full facts about this case, about the money trail and about who exactly in the Government met Mr Werritty. It is becoming clear that there is a network of individuals, some with close links to the Conservative party and other Cabinet members, who funded Mr Werritty. Given that the Prime Minister says that he knew nothing about the former Defence Secretary's arrangements, can he give the House a categorical guarantee that over the past 18 months no other Minister has been engaging in similar activities?

The Prime Minister: I think that we should have a little humility from the people who gave us cabs for hire, passports for favours, mortgages for mates, dodgy dossiers, the smearing of opponents and good days to bury bad news. I note that these were the questions that the right hon. Gentleman was meant to ask last week. I have some advice for him: if he is going to jump on a bandwagon, make sure it is still moving.

Edward Miliband: The Prime Minister has no answer to the question that people want answered. We have seen a pattern of activity from him: he does not ask the tough questions of those around him, and when anything goes wrong, it is nothing to do with him. What did he say in the ministerial code that he published? He said:

> "It is not enough simply to make a difference. We must be different."

In the past three months, we have seen his Defence Secretary resign in disgrace and his spin doctor arrested. Is that what he meant by being different?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman seems to have failed to notice that the Minister in question has resigned—you're just a bit late.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend agree that at a time when—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear Mr Brazier.

Mr Brazier: Would my right hon. Friend agree that at a time when the Governor of the Bank of England has said that we are facing a possibly unprecedented economic crisis, it is a good thing that the country is still committed to getting our debts under control and to retaining credibility in the financial markets?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. People should listen to what the Governor of the Bank of England said yesterday:

> "With a lower level of sterling and a credible plan to reduce the fiscal deficit over the medium term, we were on track. But the problems in the euro area and the marked slowing of the world economy have lengthened the period over which a return to normality is likely."

That is what we face in this country, but it means that we should stick to the plan of dealing with our debts and our deficit. If we listened to the Labour party and added £23 billion to the deficit this year, it would not be "Greek-onomics"; it would be "freakonomics".

Q2. [75291] **Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): The Prime Minister has acknowledged that there was collusion in the murder of Pat Finucane. Does he accept that in order to get to the bottom of that we have to get to the top of that? Does he recognise that many of us lack confidence that a desk review by even an eminent lawyer will be able to do that? Will he reflect further on the grave misgivings expressed by the Finucane family and the Irish Government?

The Prime Minister: Of course I understand the scepticism of the hon. Gentleman; and of course, there was great scepticism by many at the time of the Saville inquiry about whether it would get to the truth. What matters most is the intent of the British Government in uncovering what happened, being frank about it, acknowledging it and apologising for it. That is what we are going to do, and we do not need an open-ended inquiry to achieve that. To those who are sceptical, I know that they will go on being sceptical; I would just ask them to have an open mind. I believe that we can deal with this issue properly.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Cheltenham borough council on building the first new council housing in 20 years and planning more and more affordable housing on brownfield sites, but also recognise the council's anxiety that the first draft of the new national planning policy framework could render it powerless to defend vital and treasured green spaces on the urban fringe, which are being deliberately targeted by developers?

The Prime Minister: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman on the planning policy. We are not making changes to green belt or other protections, and I am sure he can discuss that with the planning Minister. Of course I congratulate all local councils that get on and build the houses that we badly need to house the homeless and deal with overcrowding. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the announcements that have been made—the Deputy Prime Minister and I have been working closely on this—to ensure that we use money from the right to buy to build more social housing so that we end the scandal of overcrowded housing.

Q3. [75292] **Steve Rotheram** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Speaker, and your staff, and would like to put on record my gratitude to the Home Secretary and those in all parts of the House for their support for the Hillsborough families during Monday's debate. Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that Governments have made mistakes, that 22 years is 22 years too long to fight for the truth and that if it is proven that there was an orchestrated cover-up, justice should prevail, despite two decades passing, and those really responsible for the Hillsborough disaster should be brought to book?

The Prime Minister: Last week I promised the hon. Gentleman that the time for his debate would be properly protected and that the House would have proper time to debate it, which it did. This week I can tell him that we are going to open up those papers and publish them as we promised so that people can see what was happening. However, it is important to remember that the Taylor inquiry was a proper and thorough investigation. It was not just an inquiry into what happened; it also led to huge changes in the way we manage and arrange football in this country. Hillsborough was a national tragedy. I am hugely sympathetic to the families of the victims, and I am sure that there are regrets for all the institutions involved at the time, including the Government.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): The Prime Minister has already given his backing to national heroes day this Friday, 21 October. Will he join me in commending the hundreds of schools taking part, celebrating inspirational role models and raising money for Help for Heroes?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to do that. I am a huge fan of Help for Heroes. The way the charity has grown has been a remarkable story. I have seen for myself the extraordinary efforts that it has made at Headley Court, where it has built an extraordinary swimming pool that is used by so many people who are recovering from their injuries in Afghanistan and elsewhere. I would certainly be pleased to support what my hon. Friend says.

Edward Miliband: Last week we heard that unemployment was at its highest level since the last Conservative Government. This week we heard that retail price inflation was at its highest level since the last Conservative Government. Does the Prime Minister still think that his plan is working?

The Prime Minister: To put the right hon. Gentleman right, the last time that CPI—which is the measure of inflation that we all now recognise—was as high as this was in 2008, when he was in government. That is quite an important point to note. Of course inflation is too high. The principal reasons for it being so high are world food prices, world fuel prices, the depreciation of sterling—[HON. MEMBERS: "VAT."] Yes, there was an effect from the increase in VAT, just as there was an effect when he increased VAT at the beginning of 2010, but the reason for increasing VAT is to get on top of the record deficit that the last Government left.

Edward Miliband: As always, the Prime Minister says that it is just like that in the rest of the world, but we have the highest inflation of any EU country apart from Estonia. That is because of decisions that he made, including the decision on VAT. Week in, week out, the evidence mounts that his plan is not working, but he refuses to change course. Last week, we heard that his flagship national insurance scheme had not worked. Now let me ask him about his flagship regional growth fund, which he launched 16 months ago. Can he tell us how many businesses have had cash paid out to them under the scheme?

The Prime Minister: First, let me just put the right hon. Gentleman right on this issue—*[Interruption.]* It is important. One of the reasons Britain has such a difficult situation with inflation is that we were the country with the biggest boom and the biggest bust of any major European country. He cannot hide from that. The regional growth fund is going to be distributing billions of pounds right across the country, and it is a thoroughly worthwhile scheme that he should be supporting.

Edward Miliband: I do not think that the Prime Minister knows the answer. The Government have certainly issued lots of press releases about the regional growth fund—22 of them—but how many businesses have been helped during the past 16 months? Two businesses have been helped. And how many businesses have gone bankrupt in that time? Sixteen thousand. What greater example could there be that this Government's plan is not working? We have had 18 months of his economic experiment, and what have we got to show for it? More and more people losing their jobs, more and more businesses going bust and inflation going through the roof—and all we have is a Prime Minister who is hopelessly out of touch.

The Prime Minister: All the right hon. Gentleman wants to do is talk down the economy, so he will not mention the fact that 300,000 new businesses have started and that 500,000 people have jobs who did not have one at the time of the election. The big question for the right hon. Gentleman is: if he does not like our plan, where is his plan? We now know that his plan to deal with our debts is—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Organised barracking is not acceptable. The Prime Minister's answer must be heard.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman's plan is to add £23 billion to Britain's deficit this year, and almost £100 billion to our deficit by the end of the Parliament. There is not a single country in Europe that would have such a crazy plan—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We are most grateful to the shadow Chancellor for his advice, but I would like to apply it to the House as a whole. The whole House must calm down; otherwise, it will be in need of medical treatment.

The Prime Minister: The problem is that it was the advice of the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls) that got us into this mess in the first place. When is he going to learn that there is not a single country in Europe that thinks that you deal with your debts by adding to your debts? That is why no one listens to him here or in Europe.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Yesterday, a report was published into the serious failure of Nottinghamshire police to protect a young woman who went on to be murdered by her violent partner. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is imperative that all police forces have the practices, policies and training necessary to protect women from violent men?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend; she makes an important point. Some police forces have taken huge steps forward in dealing with domestic violence, but not all of them have done so. We need to spread that best practice right across the country.

Q4. [75293] **Pat Glass** (North West Durham) (Lab): The Association of Colleges has just announced the largest fall in college enrolments since 1999, and it cites the abolition of EMA as a major factor. This is a tragedy of the Government's own making, and it lies directly at the door of the Secretary of State for Education. What is the Prime Minister going to do to put this right?

The Prime Minister: I think that the hon. Lady will find that the figures show that some enrolments in some colleges have actually gone up. Our replacement for EMA is a well-funded scheme that will be much better targeted at those people in need. The people who really need the extra money will get more than they did under EMA.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Families in the country are facing very high fuel bills, and there is a vested interest among the big six fuel companies not to allow competition into the market. What exactly is the Prime Minister doing to encourage more competition and to bring prices down?

The Prime Minister: One of the things we are doing is insisting that the big six have to make more of their energy available in a pooling arrangement so that new businesses can come into the industry. The reason we have to do this is that the last Government abolished the pooling arrangements, creating the situation with the big six—and we do not need to ask who the Energy Secretary was during that Government as we are looking at him.

Q5. [75294] **Tom Greatrex** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the importance of carbon capture and storage both as a way of helping to reduce our carbon emissions and as an exportable technology to help rebalance the economy, will the Prime Minister put his words into action and step in to ensure that the Longannet demonstration project goes ahead?

The Prime Minister: What I can say is that the funding we set aside for carbon capture and storage is still there and will be made available. Clearly, the Longannet scheme is not working in the way that was intended, but the money and support from the Government for this vital technology is there.

Q6. [75295] **John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): Given the huge savings for the nation made by the Cabinet Office across government without legislation and the huge financial risks provoked by constant structural reorganisation, as in the NHS, would it not be better if politicians learned to manage more and meddle less—even if Governments find the latter easier and more interesting?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Let me pay tribute to the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr Maude), who does this patient work at the heart of government and does not always get recognised for it. We have reduced management consultants by 70%, saving £870 million; we have spent £490 million less on temporary labour; we have spent £400 million less on marketing and advertising: that is an 80% reduction. These are serious changes to cut the cost of central Government and make sure we provide good value for money. None of those things was done under the last Government.

Q7. [75296] **Mr John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Before the election the Prime Minister claimed that anyone caught carrying a knife should expect to go to prison. Has he read Brooke Kinsella's article in today's *The Sun*, revealing that 40% of all knife crime is carried out by under-18s? Why will he not deliver on his promise and put them in jail?

The Prime Minister: We are doing something that the last Government failed to do, which is to create a mandatory sentence for adults who are caught with knives to make sure that happens.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that the British people are simply crying out for a referendum on the future of Europe. Will he please make history, follow the example of great Prime Ministers like Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher and give the British people the chance to vote on our future with the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I completely understand and share the frustration that many have about the way in which the European Union goes about its business, particularly the costs and the bureaucracy, but I have to say that the key focus is to get on top of the EU budget, keep Britain out of the bail-out schemes and ensure that the single market is working. Of course we are committed as the Conservative party to the return of powers from Brussels to Westminster. We are also committed as a Government to ensuring that if power passes from Westminster to Brussels, there will have to be referendum. That promise is good for the whole of this Parliament and beyond, but I do not support holding a referendum come what may. That is not our policy and I will not support such a motion.

Q8. [75297] **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): We are all aware of the bravery and courage of our armed forces as they serve in Afghanistan. Last November Ranger Aaron McCormick from just outside Coleraine in my constituency died in Helmand province; he was one of many who paid the highest price to defend freedom. His commanding officer said:

> "Today, there is a gap in our ranks which no ordinary man could fill. He was the best of his country and we mourn his loss."

Will the Prime Minister ensure that a review is carried out into the way the Ministry of Defence prepares its honours list so that families can see that the entire nation recognises the sacrifice and selflessness of these brave men and women?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman says and perhaps arrange a meeting between him and the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Mr Robathan) who is responsible for veterans and these issues. That would be a good thing to do. Let me say again that I have the highest possible regard for the professionalism, the courage and the dedication of our forces. We have paid a very high price in Afghanistan and in Iraq for what we have had to do there. I think the whole country, perhaps in a little bit of a contrast to what the hon. Gentleman says, recognises that and feels that very strongly and is looking for new ways to recognise what our armed forces do. That is why there is such strong support for Help for Heroes, for homecoming parades, for lists of honours, for the military covenant and for all such things. I think we should go on looking at what more we can do to recognise the service and sacrifice of our armed forces.

Q9. [75298] **Mr Adrian Sanders** (Torbay) (LD): As a result of inaccurate reporting and statements about a European directive applying to insulin-dependent diabetics, up to a million such people fear for their driving licences. Is it not the case that the way in which the Department of Transport interprets that directive will determine whether or not people lose their licences? Will the Prime Minister make the position clear?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly try to do that.

I entirely understand my hon. Friend's concern, which is shared by many insulin-treated diabetics throughout the country who want to continue to drive freely as they have in the past, but I can reassure him that relatively few of them will lose their licences as a result of the directive to which he has referred. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is going back to the European commission to check its understanding of the interpretation of the minimum standards in the directive. As Members in all parts of the House probably know, Departments gold-plate directives on too many occasions, and it cannot be said too often that they should stop it.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): We learnt today that the British Airports Authority is to sell Edinburgh airport. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is important for the Scottish economy that we have as many direct international routes and services as possible? If so, why does he not listen to the views of the four major airports and Transport Scotland, which want air passenger duty to be devolved?

The Prime Minister: I think the most important thing is that investment goes into the infrastructure of our airports, and I know from first hand that Edinburgh airport has superb facilities which continue to be improved. As for air passenger duty, we will continue to listen carefully to those arguments.

Q10. [75299] **Mr Sam Gyimah** (East Surrey) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that if we are to tear down the apartheid in the education system, for which he argued a few weeks ago, not only should well-performing private schools support under-performing state schools on an ad hoc basis, but we should go further and encourage them to federate?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent suggestion. I believe that that should be a cross-party initiative, and I pay tribute to Lord Adonis, who has made some extremely important speeches about the issue. I see a real opportunity for independent schools to do what Wellington college, Dulwich college and Brighton college have done, and sponsor academies in the state sector. I think that we can see the breaking down of the barriers between independent and state education, I think that this is a great way forward, and I hope that it will be given all-party support.

Q11. [75300] **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): A change in the national targets regime and cuts have led to disarray in the Greater Manchester emergency services. A stroke victim has had to wait for an hour for an ambulance, the response time of the fire service has doubled in parts of Greater Manchester, and the police switchboard is in meltdown. What reassurances can the Prime Minister give that the failure of those services will not lead to a tragic death?

The Prime Minister: I will give careful consideration to what the hon. Gentleman has said. What I can say about health funding specifically is that we are implementing the £20 billion efficiency savings suggested by the now shadow Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). However, the difference between the policy supported by his party and our policy is that we are putting all those savings back into the NHS, whereas the official Labour position is that increasing spending on the health service in real terms is "irresponsible". We think it irresponsible not to increase spending.

Q14. [75303] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): David Brown Engineering in Lockwood, in my constituency, has received a regional growth fund investment that will help to create 80 new jobs. Does the Prime Minister agree that, notwithstanding the moithering and doom-mongering of Opposition Members, there are success stories out there? With that in mind, will he consider coming to open the new innovation and enterprise centre at Huddersfield university in the spring?

The Prime Minister: What a delightful invitation! I thank my hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear about the Prime Minister's Huddersfield travel plans.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I look forward to making those travel plans.

I think that my hon. Friend has managed to show that the Leader of the Opposition's first lot of questions were irrelevant and the second lot were probably wrong.

Q12. [75301] **Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): The answer the Prime Minister just gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (Mr Spellar) is simply not good enough. The fact is that, despite all the Prime Minister's promises, fewer people caught carrying knives are going to prison under this Government than under the last, so will he apologise to Brooke Kinsella and all the bereaved families of victims of knife crime for breaking the promise he made that he would take a tougher approach?

The Prime Minister: I am full of admiration for the campaign Brooke Kinsella has run. When someone has suffered such a loss in their own family, it is incredibly brave of them to get out there and campaign for change—and not just change in the law, but also change in the way the police behave and in the way young people behave. I think she is a thoroughly good individual, with a very great campaign. What this Government are doing—which the last Government did not do—is have a mandatory sentence for knife crime, which we will introduce in our forthcoming Bill.

Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in supporting the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists "giving voice" campaign, which rightly emphasises the central importance of speech, language and communication in tackling a wide range of social issues?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in doing that, and I know that you, Mr Speaker, take a close personal interest in this issue as well. Anyone who has brought up disabled children knows the vital importance of speech and language therapists. They also know that there are often not enough of them to provide all the help and services we need, and that getting their services through the statementing process can be extremely tough. I therefore certainly agree with what my hon. Friend says.

Q13. [75302] **Mr Russell Brown** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): We know that officials from other Governments were given the impression that the former Defence Secretary's unofficial adviser represented the UK Government. How many people in total were misled, and will the Prime Minister provide a list?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman should read the Cabinet Secretary's report, as he will find there all the details he might need about what Mr Werritty was doing, but I have to say that for the hon. Gentleman's party to lecture us on lobbying comes slightly ill given that we now know that the former Labour Defence Secretary is working for a helicopter company, the former Home Secretary is working for a security firm, Lord Mandelson is at Lazard, and even the former leader and Prime Minister has in the last few months got £120,000 for speeches to Credit Suisse, Visa and Citibank. He told us he had put the money into the banks; we did not know he would get it out so quickly.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Returning to the topic of Europe, does the Prime Minister accept that moves towards fiscal union in the eurozone will ultimately undermine the single market and the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. While we believe that the logic of a single currency drives the eurozone towards greater fiscal integration, that poses particular threats and risks to those of us who want the single market to work properly. At the European Council this weekend it is important to argue for safeguards to make sure that the single market remains robust and properly protected. That is what we must do in the short term. Of course in the longer term there may be further moves towards further treaties and so forth, and at that stage there may be opportunities to bring further powers back to Britain—and there may, indeed, be opportunities to hold a referendum, but I do not believe the right answer is to hold a referendum willy-nilly in this Parliament when we have so much to do to get Europe to sort out its problems.

Mr Michael Meacher (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): On a statutory register of lobbyists, will the Prime Minister also ensure that so-called think-tanks—whose propaganda is clearly aimed at manipulating both Ministers and the public for their own ends—are required to reveal who ultimately funds them, so that we all know whose interests they really represent?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to having a statutory register of lobbyists. That does need to be put in place and, as the right hon. Gentleman says, it needs to include think-tanks and other such organisations. It also needs to include one of the biggest lobbies of all—the lobby that owns the Labour party lock, stock and trade union barrel: the trade unions.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. We now come to the statement by the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. If Members leaving the Chamber can do so quickly and quietly, we can all look forward to hearing from Mr Secretary Clarke.

Justice and Security Green Paper

12.34 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Kenneth Clarke): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement. I have today laid before Parliament the justice and security Green Paper. The document is the culmination of more than one year of careful analysis and consideration on how to respond to a difficult challenge for any liberal democracy: addressing how sensitive material can be properly handled in the civil justice system and how the work of the security and intelligence agencies can be properly scrutinised and those bodies held accountable.

The problem is this: in recent years, there has been an increase in the number and diversity of judicial proceedings that examine national security-related actions. In many cases, the facts cannot be fully established without reference to sensitive material, but this material cannot be used in open court proceedings without risking serious damage to national security or international relations. Difficulties arise both in cases in which individuals are alleging Government wrongdoing and in cases in which the Government are seeking to take Executive action against individuals who pose a risk to the public. The consequence is a Catch-22 situation in which the courts may be prevented from reaching any fully informed judgment on the case because they cannot hear all the evidence in the case. They cannot hear all the evidence because it would do serious damage to national security if the evidence was available to all parties and the public. The Government are left with unsatisfactory choices: they could risk damage to national security by disclosing the material or summaries of it, or attempt to defend a case with often large amounts of relevant material excluded. If the material cannot safely be disclosed, the Government may be forced to settle cases, either by paying compensation or by withdrawing a case brought against an individual.

Further problems are posed by applications for the disclosure of sensitive material being sought for use in other legal proceedings, particularly those overseas. The material has sometimes been generated by foreign Governments and shared with the United Kingdom Government on the most confidential of bases. In these cases, disclosure would endanger crucial international partnerships and put at risk the sharing of information, which is critical to Britain's national security.

These are issues of the utmost importance, which the previous Government faced just as much as the current one do. The work of the security and intelligence agencies, and the sensitive information that they and foreign partners produce, is essential to prevent terrorist attacks, disrupt serious crime networks and make the case for Executive actions such as deportations and asset freezing.

The current situation is clearly unsatisfactory for everyone: the Government are unable to defend their actions; claimants are left without clear judgments based on all the relevant information; and the public are left with no independent judgment by the court, because it has not been able to consider all the evidence. So the justice and security Green Paper contains a number of proposals to address these extremely difficult issues, and takes account of recent Supreme Court judgments. The Green Paper seeks views on a range of proposals including: extending the so-called closed material procedures, such as those used already in certain civil contexts, to all civil proceedings; clarifying the law on the requirement to provide a summary of the sensitive material heard in closed procedures to the other party when the procedures are utilised; enhancing the existing special advocate system to equip it to best serve the interests of the individual affected by the closed hearings; and ensuring that security issues are properly considered in cases seeking disclosure of material for use in other legal proceedings, including proceedings overseas.

The Green Paper has a further vital goal: reviewing the existing oversight arrangements for our security and intelligence agencies and the wider intelligence community. Allegations of misconduct undermine public confidence in the work of the security and intelligence agencies. It is essential that we have a strong system for overseeing their activities.

In recent years the context in which the agencies work has changed significantly, with the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005. There have been revolutionary changes in the way that people communicate and use technology. Cyber-security is a major and growing issue, and the budgets and public profiles of the agencies have increased substantially. Given all these changes it is important to ensure that scrutiny of the agencies and the wider intelligence community is effective and credible in the eyes both of Parliament and the public.

The Green Paper makes proposals further to develop the status and remit of the Intelligence and Security Committee, the Intelligence Services Commissioner and the Interception of Communications Commissioner. The Intelligence and Security Committee—that is the existing Committee—has recommended a number of detailed reforms and these have formed the basis of several of the proposals in the Green Paper. Significant reforms that we are floating include changing its status to become a statutory Committee of Parliament, giving Parliament a greater say in ISC appointments and giving the ISC greater powers to require information from the security and intelligence agencies.

The document seeks views on the appropriate balance of arrangements across the overall system of oversight. The Government welcome scrutiny of their activities in every area, including national security. The Green Paper seeks ways to increase both judicial and other independent scrutiny of such matters to unprecedented levels without undermining protection of the public and whilst maintaining strong safeguards for the rights of individuals. Faced with difficult challenges, Governments are sometimes encouraged to suppose that they need to choose between security on one hand and the rule of law on the other, but that is a false choice. As I hope this Green Paper shows, we must have both. I commend this statement to the House.

Sadiq Khan (Tooting) (Lab): First, may I thank the Secretary of State for Justice for giving advance sight of his statement this morning and for the briefing that was provided last week? We are supportive of the attempts by the Government to find a solution to the challenging situations that are encountered in sensitive legal cases. At the outset, I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to our security and intelligence services for the difficult and challenging work they do in keeping our country and citizens safe.

[Sadiq Khan]

As the Secretary of State said, the work of the security and intelligence agencies and the sensitive information that they and foreign partners produce is essential to prevent terrorist attacks, disrupt serious crime networks and make the case for Executive action such as deportations and asset-freezing. It is important that we support them with this difficult task, and finding a sensible way of handling intelligence material in judicial proceedings is one way in which we can do that. The starting point for all of us is, I hope, restating the principle of open justice, which is a central tenet of our justice system. However, we also recognise that there are occasions when the use of classified intelligence can prove to be a challenge to maintaining open justice. This is compounded by the fact that we are in a globalised environment where the sharing of intelligence between international allies is crucial to ensuring our national security and interest overseas.

I agree with much of what the Secretary of State has said about the challenges we face in this area. I hope that he has had a chance to read the excellent piece in *The Independent* today written by my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary on the importance of strong oversight for strong national security. It recognises that changes are required to ensure that scrutiny of the agencies and the wider intelligence community is effective and credible in the eyes of both Parliament and the public.

We need, as a matter of urgency, to bolster the safeguards and scrutiny mechanisms concerning issues of security and intelligence. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is proposing measures to enhance the powers of the Intelligence and Security Committee. We support the publication of a Green Paper: it is right and proper to foster a debate on what are challenging issues and to encourage key stakeholders to contribute their thoughts.

That being said, I want to take this opportunity to ask a number of questions of the Secretary of State. First, who will decide which cases are treated in the way that he sets out in his Green Paper? How many cases does he believe will be dealt with in the manner suggested and what advice has he received from special advocates and from others involved in the Special Immigration Appeals Commission? How will the overall system be scrutinised? Who will undertake the role of overseeing the whole system? Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman comment on the views of the intelligence and security agencies on these proposals? Are they supportive of what has been recommended in the Green Paper?

We are happy to work with the Government to increase both judicial and other independent scrutiny of the intelligence and security agencies without undermining the protection of the public and while maintaining strong safeguards for the rights of individuals.

Mr Clarke: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his extremely constructive response, which is important. As I said, these problems were just as acute for the previous Government as they are for the present one, and with the mounting number of actions being brought in this field, the situation is getting steadily worse. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the Government hope to get cross-party agreement. This is a very green paper. We are genuinely open to suggestions as to how to tackle the issue.

It is very much in the national interest that we do that. As the right hon. Gentleman has just said, we intend to protect our system of open justice and at the same time to protect the security of our intelligence agencies and public safety. It is essential that we set aside the ordinary partisan debate and seek to produce a system whereby our public and our allies can be reassured that these matters will be handled sensitively in this country. People will share intelligence with us knowing that it will be used properly, will not be misused and will not be disclosed in areas where it would do damage. At the same time, the public will be able to find out more often the outcome of complaints and actions involving the security services, and have a judge take the matter to a conclusion. I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman said.

I have indeed read the article in *The Independent* produced by the shadow Home Secretary. I have to say that she, too, was briefed on Privy Council terms, I think. I am used to that. I have been briefed on Privy Council terms quite frequently in the past by members of the previous Government and did not always leap out to the nearest newspaper in order to give a reaction to the briefing that I had just had, but of course in the spirit of bipartisanship that I have just proclaimed, I will take her views seriously. She is trying to find reasons for disagreeing with us on both sides of the argument, but sooner or later she will decide whether we are being too draconian and protective or too indifferent to individual liberties. I look forward to further instalments as, no doubt, does my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

The first question that the shadow Justice Secretary asked is key. He asked who will decide that the closed material procedure is the right way to proceed in whatever civil action we are talking about. In the first case it will be put to the court by the Secretary of State, but the final decision will rest with the judge. That is absolutely key. The special advocate is quite entitled to challenge the fact that this evidence is being given under the closed procedure, and the judge will have to be satisfied that on what he or she knows of the claim, it is indeed reasonable to proceed on that basis and there is indeed a threat to national security. That is a considerable reassurance.

I do not know how many cases there will be. The present pattern is that the numbers of cases is steadily increasing. It is becoming fashionable, almost, to start challenging the courts in encounters of any kind with the intelligence agencies. I do not dismiss all these actions, but there are about 30 coming through the pipeline now, so it is urgent that we address the matter.

Accountability is like the ordinary accountability for the court process, but the ISC will no doubt play a part in seeing how the proposal is working and its impact on the Security Service. On the Intelligence and Security Committee's views on its own reform, as I have already said, we have based many of our recommendations on what the Committee itself has said. It is my understanding—I may discover more clearly in a moment, if any of my right hon. Friends intervene—that the ISC is broadly supportive of where we are going. We are undoubtedly strengthening the Committee. It is being made a Committee of Parliament. It will be accountable to Parliament as well as to the Prime Minister, and it will have increased powers if our proposals gain favour in the course of the consultation.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I welcome the publication of the Green Paper because it is better to find a way of getting intelligence material into closed court proceedings than for the cases to remain unresolved. May I point out to the Secretary of State that if that is extended to inquests, it will strengthen the case for a chief coroner, which I have put to him? As someone who has served on the Intelligence and Security Committee for a long time, I believe very strongly that that Committee has to have access to operational information in order to do its job properly.

Mr Clarke: On the first point, we canvassed opinion on the prospect of it being extended to inquests. There will be a range of views on that, so this is a genuinely green part of the Green Paper. My view is that in cases where families are desperately anxious to have a proper inquiry and for someone to make some judgments about what caused the death of a family member, it is particularly unsatisfactory if the whole thing cannot be brought to some sort of conclusion because the proceedings are too open to members of the public so the evidence cannot be heard. We will therefore consult carefully on inquests. I am not sure that the legislation proposing that we have a chief coroner would have given him any powers to do much about such inquest cases, but no doubt that issue will be raised if we continue to debate whether we need a chief coroner.

We propose to improve the ISC's powers to require information to be brought before it. There are of course difficulties and sensitivities relating to operational information, but those will no doubt be raised in response to the Green Paper and are touched on, rather carefully, in the document I have published today.

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Lab): On the strengthening of the ISC, I commend what the Secretary of State is proposing. It is 17 years since the ISC was established—a different time and in the shadow of the cold war—and, as he has pointed out, circumstances have changed, so the proposals must be right. On the main part of his statement, I congratulate him on finding what appear to be elegant solutions to the terrible dilemma that successive Home Secretaries and Foreign Secretaries have faced, as I know, where the pursuit of apparent openness has resulted in injustice being done to the intelligence and security agencies and the plaintiffs, and sometimes defendants, in these actions. Will he confirm that the model he is seeking to extend for criminal-related cases will build on the establishment, many years ago, of the Special Immigration Appeals Commission? He says that the matter is urgent, and I entirely agree, so when does he plan to conclude the consultation and introduce legislation?

Mr Clarke: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He will not be surprised to learn that, although I made the statement today, I have been working very closely with my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, whose interests are crucially involved, as he well knows, having done both jobs. We propose to complete the consultation by January next year, by which time we expect to be able to come back with legislation for the House to consider. I hope that people will feed in their views, because the whole point is to try to carry as much consensus in the House as possible. Although we have not yet decided, we will perhaps introduce legislation next year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a further statement to follow and it is of course an Opposition day. I therefore appeal to all Members, without regard to seniority or distinction, for brevity.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): My right hon. and learned Friend will know well that much of the success of intelligence is based upon co-operation with other countries. Does he agree that one of the most difficult components in the balance we must strike is the need to ensure that we do not prejudice relations with other countries, such as those with whom we have a special intelligence relationship, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand?

Mr Clarke: Having said that I worked on this with the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, I have now seen my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin), who was extremely closely involved in these matters.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): And the Attorney-General.

Mr Clarke: Yes, and the ladies who made the tea. I compliment them all. I work very closely with colleagues and this is very much a Government Green Paper.

On co-operation, I agree entirely with my right hon. and learned Friend. We share information and work closely with reliable allies, with whom we are mutually very dependent, and apply the so-called control principle. It would clearly make things impossible if they feared that legal processes in the United Kingdom would mean that the confidentiality of information they share with us was likely to be compromised. It is of great importance to the security of this country that we do not compromise that principle.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I welcome the Green paper and the fact that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is working closely again with the Home Secretary on this and other issues, but I caution against extending the role of special advocates in any way. I do not know whether he was suggesting that, but there are criticisms of special advocates and the way they deal with information. I welcome the fact that the ISC is to be enhanced, but there have been occasions when the Home Affairs Committee has asked the head of MI5 to appear before us, only to be told that we must visit him. Will this now mean that he will appear before the Home Affairs Committee when we ask?

Mr Clarke: Special advocates are a key part of what we are proposing. Controlled material proceedings will involve the use of special advocates, but the Green paper touches on how to improve that use. There are serious problems relating to how much special advocates have to know about the evidence they will hear before

[Mr Kenneth Clarke]

they can take proper instructions from their clients and how far they can report back to their clients the gist of what has been said. At the moment that works quite well in immigration tribunals, on which this is based, but the Green Paper asks for suggestions on how the role of special advocates can be improved. They are an essential part of the process, but anything that helps us handle the difficulties in using them would be welcome.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Con): I warmly welcome the priority given to the protection of information provided by friendly foreign Governments, because, quite frankly, without that protection the provision of that intelligence would simply dry up, to the great detriment of this country. As Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, may I say how much the Committee welcomes the decision to follow its recommendation that it should become, for the first time, a Committee of Parliament and be given effective powers relating to the operation of the intelligence agencies and not simply relating to policy, procedure and administration, as laid down in the current legislation? That is very much to be welcomed because it will enable Parliament and the public to have confidence that there is genuine, independent and effective oversight of our intelligence agencies.

Mr Clarke: I am grateful for that authoritative response to the Green Paper. I think that it matters on both sides of the House that the ISC becomes a Committee of Parliament and, in a fuller sense, is accountable to Parliament as well as to the Prime Minister. We can build on the excellent work it has done since it was first established.

Hazel Blears (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Green paper and its proposals. Maintaining the confidence of our allies in sharing their information is absolutely key, but so is maintaining the British public's confidence in our legal system. If closed proceedings are to be extended, there will be controversy about the role of special advocates, not only in the House, but more broadly among the public, so the proposals to strengthen their role are particularly important. We must ensure that we get that right so that the public, defendants and the whole system have confidence in a fair trial and at the same time protect and maintain the necessary secret intelligence we have. It is a difficult balance to strike, but I am sure that the Secretary of State is up to it.

Mr Clarke: The right hon. Lady is also a member of the ISC, so I am grateful for her support for our proposals. She is quite right to stress the need for public confidence generally. The present situation is wholly unsatisfactory. The Guantanamo Bay case, which we settled recently, showed exactly what can go wrong. I had to come to the House to announce that we had paid out a total of £20 million, together with costs, because we had ceased to defend the action. Everyone who was inclined to believe the detainees thought that there was secret information that would confirm everything they said, and everyone who was against the detainees thought that the security services had been crippled, that they could have defended themselves and that we were paying money to worthless people. Every conspiracy theory could flourish, depending on temperament, before we even started. That is no way to retain public confidence. In our view that definitely requires closed material procedures, which means that we must have special advocates, so we welcome views on how to improve the way in which they carry out that very difficult task.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The purpose of state secrecy is to protect the safety of citizens, not to cover up criminality or to avoid embarrassment. In the Binyam Mohamed case, which led to the Gibson inquiry, the very senior judges involved went to a great deal of trouble to balance the requirements of security and open justice, but, from what I understand of this Green Paper, I am concerned that had my right hon. and learned Friend's proposals been in place a few years ago, what we learned from the Binyam Mohamed case would not have been put in the public domain, that we would not have had the Gibson inquiry and, indeed, that we would not have been able to resolve the issues arising from it. Other nations—Canada, Australia, Germany, France and Italy; all our major allies other than America—are able to be very robust about that. Why can we not be?

Mr Clarke: If my right hon. Friend will excuse me, I shall not comment on the Binyam Mohamed case in detail. The judges take one view and others take another, but the Green Paper addresses the problem. One would need the facility for closed material procedures, so the starting point would be a decision, confirmed by the judge, that in the interest of national security the case should take place in closed proceedings and, therefore, not be revealed afterwards. That is an altogether better way of resolving the issue than allowing an argument to break out between judges, the Security Service and everybody else afterwards about whether something has been revealed that should not have been. That was where we were in the case of Binyam Mohamed.

I cannot remember my right hon. Friend's second point, but we have got the balance right. Members of the Intelligence and Security Committee have said that confidentiality vis-à-vis allies is absolutely crucial, and it is no good currying favour by trying to get behind that, because in fact the safety of people in this country would be endangered if we did not have the full and frank co-operation of allied countries providing us with their intelligence, just as we provide them with ours.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am still seeking brevity, an object lesson in which I know will be provided by the right hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Paul Goggins).

Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker, and I, too, welcome the Green Paper. It is perfectly clear that the balance on disclosure has tipped too far in sensitive cases, and that results in Ministers being constrained in their ability to fulfil their ultimate obligation, which is to protect the public. Given the complexity of the situation, may I ask specifically what plans the Secretary of State has to consult the judiciary?

Mr Clarke: I have had some preliminary discussions with the judiciary, and I am quite sure that they will now respond quite fully to our Green Paper, but I agree that, as we are making very important changes to civil procedure, it is essential that we take on board their views. In the end, this House will decide, but it would be most unsatisfactory and be asking for a great deal of future trouble if we started trying to put in civil procedures that the judiciary thought unsatisfactory and, in case law, sought to modify. I have taken great trouble to consult the judiciary, and I will continue to do so. I think that that will be possible, because they are just as concerned as everybody else about national security and, certainly, about open justice, and they will help us to reach a conclusion.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): There will be nervousness at the use of special advocates in cases such as those of the Guantanamo detainees or in inquests. Does the Secretary of State agree that the most effective way of stopping such cases coming forward is to ensure that international law is observed, that torture is never condoned implicitly or explicitly and that our security services are more effectively monitored so that we can always be certain about the probity of their activities?

Mr Clarke: I certainly agree with all my right hon. Friend's principles, and they are confirmed by the current Government: we are flatly against the use of torture; we do comply with international law; my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has published new guidelines for the security and intelligence services; and, as I have said, we certainly want them to be properly accountable.

No one has ever established malpractice in previous cases, and one thing we are seeking to do is to draw a line under all the past allegations. I have been settling cases and all the rest of it, but no one has ever made an adverse finding against the security services on any of those grounds. Having public confidence, we now want a process whereby we can sustain it.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that certain judicial decisions on intelligence sharing have undermined the confidence of our close allies, particularly the United States, with a material effect on some areas in which they are willing to co-operate. Does he not share my concern that our close allies will be concerned to find that he now places on judges the burden of making those decisions? In reality and in our experience, judges look at the conduct of their own proceedings, rather than at national security.

Mr Clarke: There has been the one case, the Binyam Mohamed case, which we have touched on, but unsurprisingly no one here has touched on the growing number of cases under the so-called Norwich Pharmacal procedure, on which we make recommendations. It is important that we do not find that the interests of the particular parties lead to highly sensitive intelligence material just getting into the public domain. Having consulted the judiciary, and from my experience of them, I have to say that it is actually wrong to argue that they are indifferent to the needs of national security; they accept that we need clear reform of our processes. We had been waiting for some Supreme Court cases before we produced our final proposals in this Green Paper, and the judiciary think it is time for Parliament to make clear how the processes can be modified to enable them to protect justice and liberty on the one hand and national security on the other.

Jessica Lee (Erewash) (Con): Will my right hon. and learned Friend please set out the position in respect of Northern Ireland? It is of course a part of the United Kingdom, and it bears the scars of conflict all too well, so will these measures be applicable in Northern Ireland?

Mr Clarke: It is very important that my hon. Friend raises this issue. We have indeed consulted the Northern Ireland Office. The issue applies to Northern Ireland, and these matters come up frequently in the Northern Ireland context. In the course of our consultation on the Green Paper, I expect that we will receive quite a lot of representations based on the experience there.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We clearly need some form of closed material procedure, if only to deal with the counter-intelligence threat, which is very strong at the moment, from countries such as Russia, but may I urge the Lord Chancellor to look at whether the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee could not, as is the case with the Public Accounts Committee, always be a member of the Opposition? The Member who currently holds the post could perfectly well have held it when we were in power, so would it not make greater sense for the Chair to be a member of the Opposition?

Mr Clarke: Well, we will look at that, because I stress that this is a Green Paper and we are seeking cross-party consensus, which, were we ever to go into opposition again, I trust we would maintain on such subjects. The shadow Home Secretary made the same point, and we will look at it, but the idea that the Chairman's party allegiance is an important consideration is not immediately obvious to me. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman confirms that the current Chairman, who happens to be a Conservative MP, is a former Foreign Secretary and whom nobody criticises as Chairman, is the right person to be Chairman. A rule that the Chair switches party might be relevant to other Committees, but for this Committee it is not quite as necessary as it obviously is for a Select Committee.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I commend the Justice Secretary for drawing the politicised sting from the false battle between justice and security. Will he give us his early thoughts on the possibility of creating an inspector-general of the intelligence services in order to ensure that oversight is concentrated in a single body?

Mr Clarke: The idea is floated in the Green Paper, and it often comes up. We will obviously look at it, alongside all the other things we are looking at to make the security services more accountable, but it is a suggestion often made, it remains a live issue and we will consider it very carefully.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): One way we could make the new Committee effective would be to guarantee that its reports were debated in this Chamber. Will the Government commit to making time for such debates, or will they leave it to the Backbench Business Committee?

Mr Clarke: That is more a matter for the Leader of the House than for me, but I am just turning to some members of the Committee, and I note that its reports are debated here sometimes. If Members with a close interest in the subject do not consider the frequency of debate to be adequate, however, I suggest that they take it up with my right hon. Friend. I do not think that these particular measures touch upon the frequency of debate, but the Committee is to be made more accountable to Parliament. That is one of the underlying features of our reforms.

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): I am instinctively uncomfortable about keeping evidence secret from those in court cases, but I look forward to seeking the detailed safeguards in the Green Paper. The Secretary of State says that the measures are intended for civil cases, but what assurances can he give the House that he will not consider using similar processes for criminal cases, in which somebody's liberty might be at risk?

Mr Clarke: There is no question of having this in criminal cases—it would be quite impossible. A person could not be convicted on the basis of evidence that he was not allowed to hear and that was withheld from the public. The position will be the same after this as it is now—if evidence is not possessed that can be used in open court, the prosecution has to be dropped and cannot proceed. I share my hon. Friend's sensitivities about any part of civil proceedings being closed—particularly, for example, in inquests, as I said a moment ago. However, I have come to the conclusion that that is less unsatisfactory than a situation in which the case cannot be heard in civil proceedings, so both parties go away, both claiming they are still right, and nobody has been able to hear all the evidence and give a judgment that, although not everybody will always accept it, will be of considerable reassurance to the general public if someone has heard it all and come to a conclusion.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that it is vital that we have a common regime across the United Kingdom in dealing with the fight against terrorism? Given that, what talks will he have with the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland to ensure not only that there is a consistent approach but that there are no loopholes?

Mr Clarke: I think that the issues are exactly the same, in relevant cases, in all parts of the United Kingdom. Obviously the situation in Northern Ireland is particularly relevant to all this, so we have already consulted in Northern Ireland with the Justice Minister and others, and we will continue to do so. We are hoping to resolve problems that have been big in Northern Ireland for a long time, and we could not possibly have different principles applying on either side of the Irish sea.

Jonathan Evans (Cardiff North) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend recognise that there remains a high level of dissatisfaction with the degree of parliamentary scrutiny covering issues in relation to, for instance, extraordinary rendition, which was investigated in Europe in an inquiry that I was associated with but which here in this House was dealt with only by an all-party committee? In those circumstances, does he think that the changes that he is proposing will enable the Intelligence and Security Committee to look into these matters more effectively?

Mr Clarke: Yes, indeed; I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I remind him that we are going to look into rendition and a lot of the other allegations once we get the Gibson inquiry under way. It is clear that that inquiry will go into all the things that have troubled my hon. Friend and other people for some years. Again, we try to do these things in parallel. We are trying to draw a line under the past and then make sure that practice in future attracts less criticism because there is less ground for it. We cannot start the Gibson inquiry until the police have completed their investigations, which are still ongoing; as soon as they have concluded them, the whole question of rendition, among other things, will be looked at by the inquiry.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly highlighted the importance of the growing cyber-threat. He is of course aware that the vast majority of targets of those threats are in areas such as finance, utilities and so on, which, historically, we have not regarded as places where security threats would occur. This now requires a much higher level of engagement from employees and people working in those sectors. Will he take steps to ensure that the industries where there are real threats are carried with us in this important regard?

Mr Clarke: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are investing in cyber-security. He is right to say that this is now an extremely important issue for many sectors of British industry, as well as for the Government, that complicates matters and gives rise to the need for more actions now. There are myriad circumstances in which national security may be compromised by certain material. Some of the simpler ones arise because the identity of informants might be revealed. In others, the existence of some particular technology of which the other side is blissfully unaware will be revealed if one starts putting in one's intelligence material. It is just as important to national security that those who are not friends of this country should not always know the capacity of the intelligence services in these cases. That is why the growing problem of cyber-security is a particular reason for strengthening our procedures and strengthening their supervision by this House.

Cabinet Secretary Report (Government Response)

1.14 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Cabinet Secretary's report on the allegations against my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). In the interests of transparency, the Prime Minister published the report in full yesterday afternoon and copies were made available to Members immediately after publication. The Government have come to the House at the earliest appropriate moment following the report's publication. It is not usual for the Government to make an oral statement following the resignation of a Minister. However, given the wider implications of the Cabinet Secretary's report, it is right that the House has an opportunity to consider the Government's response.

Before coming to the report, I would like first to set out to the House the changes to the regulations governing Ministers which this Government have already introduced. In May 2010, the Prime Minister published a new ministerial code and committed the Government to an unprecedented level of transparency. The Government are publishing on a quarterly basis details of all Ministers' meetings with external organisations, including lobbyists, and including meetings with senior media executives; all hospitality received by Ministers; all gifts given and received by Ministers over £140; all Ministers' visits overseas; contracts over £25,000; special advisers' salaries over £58,200, and estimated pay bill; special advisers' gifts and hospitality received; spend on Government procurement cards over £500; and senior officials' hospitality expenses and meetings with external organisations.

The Prime Minister also significantly tightened the rules regulating former Ministers when they leave office. Former Ministers are now barred from lobbying Government for two years, as well as having to get the advice of the independent Advisory Committee on Business Appointments for any appointments or employment they wish to take up for a period of two years after leaving office, and the code makes it clear that former Ministers must abide by the advice of the Committee.

Turning now to the matter in hand, following speculation in the media my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset requested that the permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence investigate the allegations. The Prime Minister then asked the Cabinet Secretary to establish the facts of the case in relation to allegations in the context of the ministerial code. The interim report prepared by the permanent secretary found that

> "there are areas where the current guidance on propriety and the management of Ministerial Private Offices needs to be strengthened".

As the ministerial code makes clear, it is the Prime Minister's duty to enforce the ministerial code, having consulted the Cabinet Secretary. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has therefore acted at all times in accord with the proper process.

Last week, my right hon. Friend resigned as Defence Secretary. As he said in his resignation letter to the Prime Minister:

> "I mistakenly allowed the distinction between my personal interest and my government activities to become blurred".

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister accepted my right hon. Friend's resignation from Government and his reasons for resigning while making it clear that he viewed him as a superb Defence Secretary, who had implemented fundamental changes that will help to ensure that our armed forces are fully equipped to meet the challenges of the modern era—and I wholeheartedly endorse that view.

The report by the Cabinet Secretary confirms that my right hon. Friend did indeed breach the ministerial code. The ministerial code requires Ministers to ensure that no conflict arises, or could reasonably be perceived to arise, between their public duties and their private interests, financial or otherwise. My right hon. Friend's actions constituted a clear breach of the ministerial code which he has already acknowledged. However, as recognised in the Cabinet Secretary's report:

> "Dr Fox has stated to Parliament Mr Werritty had no access to classified documents and was not briefed on classified matters. There is nothing in the evidence we have taken to contradict this."

The report also says that

> "there is no evidence from this review that casts doubt on Dr Fox's statement to Parliament that public funds were not misused"

or

> "that Dr Fox gained financially in any way from this relationship".

The permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence has already accepted that there should have been much tighter procedures within the Department and is taking steps to strengthen them to ensure that the ministerial code is properly adhered to.

The Cabinet Secretary's report concludes that my right hon. Friend's close and visible association with Mr Werritty in the UK and overseas, and the latter's use of misleading business cards, has fuelled a general impression that Mr Werritty spoke on behalf of the UK Government. The risks of my right hon. Friend's associations with Mr Werritty were raised with him by both his private office and the permanent secretary. My right hon. Friend took action in respect of business cards, but clearly made a judgment that his contact with Mr Werritty should continue. This may have been a reasonable judgment had the contacts been minimal and purely personal and had not involved Mr Werritty's frequent attendance at meetings in the MOD main building and on overseas visits. The damage arose because the frequency, range and extent of the contacts were not regulated as well as they should have been, and that was exacerbated by the fact that the Department was not made aware of all the various contacts.

The Cabinet Secretary also concluded that the links and a lack of clarity in the roles meant that the donations given to Mr Werritty could give rise to the perception of a conflict of interests. He went on to say that there was an inappropriate blurring of the lines between official and personal relationships. Mr Werritty should not have been provided with access to my right hon. Friend's diary and itinerary. Nor should he have been allowed to participate in the social elements of the then Defence Secretary's overseas trips in a way that might have given rise to the impression that he was part of the official party. He should not have had meetings in the MOD with such frequency, as that access may have provided others with a belief that Mr Werritty was speaking for Government and was part of an official entourage. That impression was, of course, reinforced by the business cards that Mr Werritty provided to people.

[Sir George Young]

The Cabinet Secretary has recommended further strengthening of procedures across Government. There are five specific recommendations in his report and it is worth setting those out in full. The first is:

> "Where discussions take place with external organisations which raise substantive issues relating to departmental decisions or contracts and where an official is not present Ministers should inform their department."

The second is:

> "On Ministerial visits, whether in the UK or abroad, departments should make sure there is no confusion about who is and is not a member of the Ministerial party",

and the third states:

> "Officials should accompany Ministers to all official visits and meetings overseas at which it is expected that official matters may be raised, and should seek guidance from the FCO if there is any uncertainty about the status of such meetings or the attendance of non-officials at them."

The fourth is:

> "Permanent Secretaries should discuss with Ministers at the time of their appointment and regularly thereafter whether any acquaintances or advisers have contractual relationships with the department or are involved in policy development. The Minister and the Permanent Secretary should take action as necessary to ensure there can be no actual or perceived conflict of interest in line with the principles of the Ministerial Code."

Finally:

> "Permanent Secretaries should take responsibility for ensuring departmental procedures are followed, and for raising any concerns with Ministers, advising the Cabinet Secretary and ultimately the Prime Minister where such concerns are not resolved."

The Prime Minister has accepted those recommendations in full and the Cabinet Secretary is writing to permanent secretaries today to set out the processes that now need to be followed.

Finally, I will turn briefly to wider action that the Government already intend to take to ensure greater transparency between Ministers and external organisations. The coalition agreement committed us to regulating lobbying through introducing a statutory register of lobbyists, ensuring even greater transparency. It is worth noting from the Cabinet Secretary's report that:

> "Whilst Mr Werritty was not a lobbyist, the Government's commitment to consult on a statutory register of lobbyists will bring further transparency to this area."

We intend to produce a consultative document setting out our proposals next month, with an aim of legislating next year. This work is being taken forward by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), and my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House.

At the end of the last Parliament, public trust in Parliament was at an unprecedented low. This Government are committed to working to rebuild confidence in our political and democratic institutions and we will continue to put in place any measure necessary to ensure that the highest standards rightly expected of our elected representatives are met.

I commend this statement to the House.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement, but what a condemnation it was of the way in which government is being run in this country. It is a matter of deep regret that the Prime Minister has chosen not to deal with this statement himself. It is the Prime Minister and not the Leader of the House who is the guardian of the ministerial code, and who has the final say on who is fit to be in his Government. Today, he has ducked those responsibilities.

When news of the potential wrongdoing at the Ministry of Defence first surfaced, the former Secretary of State for Defence announced an inquiry into himself, but only after he had called the allegations "baseless". As the revelations mounted daily, the Prime Minister belatedly announced this limited inquiry by the Cabinet Secretary. By then, it was apparent to everyone that the ministerial code had been breached. The Secretary of State admitted as much. Why then did the Prime Minister not refer this case to the independent adviser on Ministers' interests, Sir Philip Mawer?

What we have today is a far cry from such a full, independent, external inquiry. The Cabinet Secretary has been forced to rely on the word of Adam Werritty and the former Defence Secretary, whose explanations have repeatedly unravelled at the first hint of scrutiny. This report merely scratches the surface of potential misconduct in government. Consequently, it raises more questions than it answers.

Even in its narrow and limited form, the Cabinet Secretary's report is damning. It finds the former Defence Secretary's conduct

> "not appropriate and not acceptable".

It reveals, in stark detail, multiple breaches of the ministerial code. The former Defence Secretary has knowingly circumvented the long-established rules that are in place to prevent conflicts of interest from arising. The report shows that wealthy individuals funded Adam Werritty. He was, in effect, a privately funded special adviser. The former Secretary of State's shadow political operation routinely undermined our civil service structures and their accountability. The report fails to expose the full facts about the money trail. There is no investigation into the benefits that Adam Werritty received. There is no full disclosure of his funders and the purpose behind the donations. Given the Prime Minister's failure to answer this question earlier today, can the Leader of the House give the House a categorical assurance that no similar practices are taking place anywhere else in this Government?

I turn now to the details of the report. We need answers on the following issues. The role of the Sri Lanka Development Trust is not considered in the report. Mr Werritty's presence in Iran, Washington and Israel remains unexplained. We do not know whether Mr Werritty profited from his association with the former Defence Secretary, although we do know about the five-star nature of his taste in flights and hotels. We do not know what those secretive donors, who were in effect Mr Werritty's paymasters, were promised for their money, nor indeed if they got it. We do not know whether the former Defence Secretary commissioned any work from the MOD as a result of the offline and irregular meetings brokered by Mr Werritty. We do not know which other Ministers and senior staff have met Mr Werritty, because the Prime Minister has refused to publish a full list. That is totally unacceptable. A full list must be published. In order to deal with all those issues, will the Leader of the House agree that further investigation is both essential and urgent?

Will the Leader of the House also tell the House whether he has initiated an inquiry into the use by the former Defence Secretary of his parliamentary office to run Atlantic Bridge as a charity, and whether he is satisfied that that was proper under parliamentary rules? Some of the key funders of Atlantic Bridge were the key funders of Adam Werritty. They are also the key funders of the Conservative party. The links are complex, but they are deep and well-established.

We learned yesterday of the meeting between Adam Werritty and two members of the existing Defence team. They must give the House a full explanation of the details of those meetings and their connections to Adam Werritty.

We also learned in the report that the risks of the former Defence Secretary's association with Mr Werritty were raised with him by his private office, the permanent secretary, a former permanent secretary and a former Chief of the Defence Staff. He chose to ignore those warnings. Why was he allowed to make that choice? What did the permanent secretary at the MOD then do? Were any of those concerns raised with the Cabinet Secretary and, if so, did the Cabinet Secretary raise them with the Prime Minister? Why was this situation allowed to continue for so long? Why was the former Defence Secretary allowed to treat the ministerial code as if it was an optional extra?

The report recommends that senior civil servants have greater oversight of ministerial behaviour. Yet the fact remains that it is Ministers who are responsible for their own conduct and the Prime Minister who is the guardian of the ministerial code. He is expected to enforce it, not allow it to be broken multiple times.

Before the last election, the Prime Minister promised to end the

> "cosy relationship between politics, government, business and money".

That promise has now been broken. This scandal has only damaged public confidence in the Government further. Meetings without civil servants; money off the books; luxury social visits in between visits to our brave servicemen and women; and today, the Prime Minister's contempt on the matter was revealed. Simply saying that the Defence Secretary has resigned is not good enough. The Government need to take responsibility for this self-inflicted crisis. The House needs answers to the unanswered questions, or people will only conclude that this Government have something to hide.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. We do not take points of order in the middle of statements, or at any time in statements, only afterwards.

Sir George Young: I will go through the issues that the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) raised. No Prime Minister has ever made a statement to the House following the resignation of a Minister. In circumstances such as these, when there has been a report on a breach of the code, there has normally been a written ministerial statement. There has never before been an oral statement in circumstances such as these, but this Government have come to the Dispatch Box at the earliest stage, having made a written ministerial statement and set out our proposals.

The hon. Lady said that the Cabinet Secretary or the Prime Minister had not followed due process. If she looks at paragraph 1.3 of the ministerial code, she will see that it states:

> "If there is an allegation about a breach of the Code, and the Prime Minister, having consulted the Cabinet Secretary feels that it warrants further investigation, he will refer the matter to the independent adviser on Ministers' interests."

That is exactly what he has done. We have established that there has been a breach of the code, the Secretary of State has resigned and we have a comprehensive report identifying the breaches and making recommendations for the future. It is not a superficial report; it is a comprehensive piece of work by the Cabinet Secretary, and the House should be grateful for it.

I turn to the specific questions that the hon. Lady asked. Other Ministers are perfectly happy to make it clear whether they have met Mr Werritty. On whether similar practices are going on throughout Government, if she has any evidence I would like her to bring it forward. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must not chunter or, worse still, yell at the Leader of the House. He must be heard.

Sir George Young: It is worth noting that paragraph 11 of the Cabinet Secretary's report states:

> "I am of the view that this is an issue which was specific to Dr Fox."

The hon. Member for Wallasey raised a number of other issues, some of which are for other bodies to deal with. If she looks at paragraph 1 of the Cabinet Secretary's report, she will see that it states:

> "Since then, more allegations about Dr Fox's conduct have arisen many of which will be the responsibility of others to answer, including the Electoral Commission which regulates political parties and their funding."

She also asked a specific question on a matter that is the responsibility of the Charity Commission.

The hon. Lady then asked what went wrong in the Ministry of Defence. If she reads the report, she will see that what went wrong was that the permanent secretary did not raise the issue with the Cabinet Secretary, who would then have raised it with the Prime Minister. There is a specific recommendation in the report that that situation should not happen again, and that if there are any future instances, the permanent secretary should notify the Cabinet Secretary, who will notify the Prime Minister.

I say very gently to the hon. Lady that her party is not negotiating from a position of strength on this issue. I think what the public want is a serious debate about what went wrong, and they want Members on both sides of the House to join together in driving up standards in public life.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind right hon. and hon. Members who came into the Chamber after the start of the statement—there were several of them on both sides of the House—that they certainly should not expect to

[Mr Speaker]

be called. It would be much better if they did not stand. This is an Opposition day and there is pressure on business, so brevity is of the essence.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): I warmly welcome the Leader of the House's statement. In it, he said that senior civil servants "accepted that there should have been much tighter procedures within the Department". Will he say specifically what is wrong with existing procedures, and what steps he is taking to ensure that the failing lies with those procedures rather than with the action or inaction of the civil servants themselves?

Sir George Young: I thank my hon. Friend for his endorsement. What went wrong was that the permanent secretary, having raised the matter with the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of State having persisted in the behaviour that she found disturbing, did not take further action. The matter should have been escalated to the Cabinet Secretary, who would then have notified the Prime Minister. A specific recommendation is going out to all permanent secretaries today that should there be a recurrence in future, it should be escalated. Had that happened in this case, the issue probably would have been addressed at a much earlier stage.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I feel sorry for the Leader of the House for his being forced to make this statement because the Prime Minister does not have the gumption to do so.

Given that it was quite clear on day one of this scandal to anybody who has bothered to read the ministerial code that the Minister in question not only broke it but drove a coach and horses through it, why the dither and delay from the Prime Minister? Does that not show yet again that we have a Prime Minister who does not do detail and does not have a clue what is going on in the rest of his Government?

Sir George Young: If I may say so to the right hon. Gentleman, I think that is way over the top. When Lord Mandelson resigned not once but twice, the Prime Minister did not come to the House to make a statement. In this case there is a statement from a Minister on the action that we propose to take to stop any recurrence. Far from the Prime Minister dithering or delaying, he asked for something to be on his desk on Monday. He then asked the Cabinet Secretary to produce a report. Out of decency and fair play, the Prime Minister decided to wait until the report was available rather than taking precipitate action. That is not dither and delay; that is fair play.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend not think it rather strange that some of those who are campaigning hard for a register of lobbyists did nothing over the past 13 years and created a lobbyists' free-for-all? Does he not also think that it is strange for the Labour party, which found itself in the Bernie Ecclestone lobbying scandal, to now pretend it is Mother Teresa?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend reminds the House that, as I said a moment ago, the Opposition are not negotiating from a position of strength. It is indeed the case that from 1997 to last year, no action was taken to introduce a statutory register of lobbyists. When the Public Administration Committee recommended that in 2009, the Labour Government specifically rejected it, and they voted against other measures that would have promoted transparency, so I do not think we have any lessons to learn on this matter from Labour Members.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Is Mr Werritty the only unofficial representative acting on behalf of a Cabinet Minister or a Minister of State?

Sir George Young: If the hon. Gentleman has any evidence—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] I think people should be careful before making general allegations without any specific evidence at all. This is a—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the Leader of the House, but may I say to the House that he is a person of unfailing courtesy? I think that would be accepted on both sides of the House. He does not yell at other Members, and—*[Interruption.]* Order. And other Members should not yell at him.

Sir George Young: I quoted a passage from paragraph 11 of the Cabinet Secretary's report, in which he stated that he believed the situation was "specific to Dr Fox". I do not think there is any evidence at all that Mr Werritty had a similar relationship with any other Minister in the Government. If the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) has any evidence of any irregularity, I think he should put it forward and substantiate what he has said.

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): I appreciate the Leader of the House's point about a register of lobbyists, and I add my voice to the call for a statutory register. Does he find it surprising to hear some of the comments from the Opposition, given that under the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown), union officials were regularly in No. 10 unofficially attending meetings?

Sir George Young: I agree with my hon. Friend that this should not become part of the political currency between the two parties. On the issue of lobbying, as I think he knows, we plan to publish a consultation document early next month on our proposals for a statutory register of lobbyists, with a view to legislating next year.

Mr Michael Meacher (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's seemingly all-encompassing catchment in the designation of lobbyists, but I would like assurance on two points. First, will he confirm that the ultimate funding of all lobbyists, think-tanks and all others who seek to exert influence will be revealed on an open public register that is readily accessible and tell us what the sanctions will be if that is not done? Secondly, since all those who seek to manipulate always want to escape detection, how will he deal with the admittedly difficult situation in which formal meetings suddenly morph into informal meetings where significant commitments might be made but remain undetected?

Sir George Young: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. The answer to the first section of his question is yes, that is exactly what we have in mind: an open, accessible register of statutory lobbyists. On the other issues, we propose to consult on what exactly a lobbyist is. I think the definition should embrace what people outside generally believe to be lobbying and should be comprehensive. On the question of what activity is then caught, we would be very grateful for his views during the consultation process.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I welcome the Leader of the House's statement? The Select Committee on Public Administration is looking into how we can do more to fix broken politics. I particularly congratulate him on ending the sofa government that we saw in the past as well as the tidal wave of sleaze, and I urge him to take action on the revolving door that still persists for former Ministers of this House.

Sir George Young: The revolving door is an issue I addressed in my statement and we are tightening up the process for it. I am delighted to hear that the Public Administration Committee, which originally proposed the statutory register in its report, is thinking of returning to this issue and I hope that it will inform the Bill when it is introduced.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): On 10 October, I asked the then Defence Secretary when he was first made aware of concerns by his permanent secretary. He said that

> "I was not aware of any direct approach from them. The first direct approach I can remember was when my current permanent secretary came to me in August".—[*Official Report*, 10 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 30.]

That leads to two questions. Either the then Defence Secretary misled the House and he was made aware of that before then or the previous permanent secretary has some serious questions to answer. These things have been going on since he took office and for more than a year concerns have arisen and nobody has done anything. The civil service must look at its own conduct in how it makes people aware when things go wrong.

Sir George Young: I think it is clear from the report that things did go wrong in the Ministry of Defence. That was accepted in the permanent secretary's initial report. Procedures were not followed and we are learning from that and ensuring that there is no recurrence.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Is it not the case that my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) has resigned and that the Cabinet Secretary's report could not be clearer that there was no breach of national security and that my right hon. Friend did not gain financially from any of these arrangements? Is not the most important thing now for the debate to move on? We have important operations in Libya and Afghanistan that we must focus on in the national interest.

Sir George Young: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have commissioned a report, we have found out what went wrong, we have made recommendations to put it right and we have learned the lessons. I agree that we should now move on.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Both in questions to the Prime Minister and during this statement today, the question of whether other Ministers have behaved in a similar manner has been raised. The Leader of the House has made it clear that anyone who wants to make allegations should do so. I do not think that people are making allegations—they are raising the general worry that the rest of the population of this country feels. If someone as experienced as the former Secretary of State allowed this to go on, thinking that it was reasonable, surely it is possible that other Ministers, equally unwittingly, might be doing the same thing. Would it not benefit us all if the Cabinet Secretary were to look into all these things to ensure that there is not any other concern?

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but in the last Parliament a number of Ministers from his party had to resign. We never made any suggestion that because one Minister had broken the code, all Ministers had broken the code, and it is important that similar accusations should not be made in this Parliament.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The trouble with the idea of trying to move on is that we are seeing a pretty shabby pattern in which the Prime Minister is given evidence, refuses to look at it but holds on for dear life to as many of his friends as he can. It happened with Coulson and it has happened again now. Now there is evidence about the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Gregory Barker) and his apparent adviser, Miriam Maes. Will there be an investigation into that, too?

Sir George Young: On the first point, to say that the Prime Minister refused to look at the evidence is simply absurd as he looked at it, published it and has acted on it. As for the issues concerning the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the matter has been resolved. The person concerned is an adviser to the Department and not to a Minister.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware that some good has come out of all this, as it has shown up the whole murky world of various shady and dubious lobbyists and various individuals who have contributed heavily to the Tory party? One thing is absolutely clear: the Tory party has not changed from last time it was in office.

Sir George Young: It would be easier to take the hon. Gentleman seriously on this had he not voted against a specific amendment to promote transparency in lobbying.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): A few moments ago, the Leader of the House said—if I heard him correctly—that other Ministers would be perfectly happy to reveal whether they had meetings with Mr Werritty. Will he therefore tell the House when we will get a full and comprehensive list of all meetings between Ministers and Mr Werritty and whether it will extend to senior officials, too?

Sir George Young: It has already been put in the public domain for a number of Government Departments. It will be put in the public domain by the rest of the Departments very shortly.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): How many Government Front-Bench Members have received donations from Pargav Ltd and will the Leader of the

[Huw Irranca-Davies]

House investigate that? May I urge on him caution about the defence of bringing forward evidence? The last time that was used was on the 10th of this month and the former Secretary of State subsequently resigned, having used that very defence.

Sir George Young: Any donations that Ministers or any Members of the House have received from a company such as Pargav have to be put in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome the fact that the Government are adopting the procedure of coming forward today and making a statement, which is a departure from previous practice and is to be welcomed. One of the recommendations of the report is that greater responsibility should be given to permanent secretaries to ensure that departmental procedures are followed, yet in this case the permanent secretary at the MOD has already accepted that there should have been much tighter procedures within the Department. What confidence can the public have, given the obvious failings within the Department at that senior level?

Sir George Young: The recommendations apply not just to the permanent secretary but, for example, to the private office as well. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome for this new procedure and I hope that it is one that I do not have to follow too often.

Mr Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): How is what the Leader of the House has said about conflicts of interest or perceived conflicts of interest and the ministerial code be consistent with the approach the Government have taken in the case of the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), who has been relieved of those areas of his portfolio where such a conflict might occur?

Sir George Young: That matter has been dealt with by the Cabinet Secretary.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Leader of the House said in his statement that Mr Werritty was not a lobbyist. How then will the register and the reforms that he proposes affect the behaviour of someone like Mr Werritty?

Sir George Young: I did not say that I did not think that he was a lobbyist but that the Cabinet Secretary did not think that he was a lobbyist. When we publish the consultation paper next month, we will be open to consultation on what a lobbyist is. In the view of many people, the definition should include Mr Werritty.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Leaving political differences aside, it is a genuine shame that one of the few members of the Government from an ordinary background has been forced to resign. Will the Leader of the House tell us how many donations were solicited by the former Defence Secretary, how much those donations were valued at and why he solicited them?

Sir George Young: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said about my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), but he was not forced to resign. He chose to resign last Friday and set out the reasons for that in his letter.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Is it not the prime duty of the Leader of the House to try to restore public faith and confidence in this institution? We handled the expenses scandal in an atrocious way that damaged us greatly. Would it not be a terrible mistake if we ignored the real abuses of the revolving door and of lobbying and went ahead and indulged in a process of blaming each other? If we are going to be successful in convincing the public, we must follow the Public Administration Committee. Otherwise, the public will look at this debate today and say, "Same old MPs, same old sleaze."

Sir George Young: I believe that the hon. Gentleman's question will be the last. On that consensual note, I hope we can draw these exchanges to a close.

Personal Statement

1.49 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Two weeks ago, I visited Misrata in Libya, and I met a man who showed me photographs of his dead children. A few days later, I resigned from the Cabinet. One was an unbearable tragedy, the other was a deep personal disappointment. I begin with that necessary sense of proportion.

As I said in the House last week,

> "I accept that it was a mistake to allow distinctions to be blurred between my professional responsibilities and my personal loyalty to a friend."—[*Official Report*, 10 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 23.]

I accepted then that it was a mistake to attend a meeting with a potential supplier without an official present and, with hindsight, I should have been more willing to listen to the concerns of those around me. I have attempted to be clear and transparent on all the issues raised.

I would like to say again that I am very sorry to my colleagues in the House and to all those who feel let down by the decisions I have made. I have always believed in personal responsibility, and I accept the Cabinet Secretary's conclusions. I am pleased at the explicit acknowledgment that I neither sought, expected nor received any financial gain. That was being widely and wrongly implied. I also welcome the clarification of the fact that no national security issues were breached, that no classified documents were made available, and that no classified matters were briefed. Those accusations, too, were widely made and are deeply hurtful.

The ministerial code has been found to be breached, and for this I am sorry. I accept that it is not only the substance but perception that matters, and that is why I chose to resign. I accept the consequences for me without bitterness or rancour. I do not blame anyone else, and I believe that you do not turn your back on your friends or family in times of trouble. However, it is unacceptable that family and friends who have nothing to do with the central issues should be hounded and intimidated by elements of the media, including in this case elderly relatives and children. It is difficult to operate in the modern environment, as we know, where every bit of information, however irrelevant or immaterial, is sensationalised, and where opinions or even accusations are treated as fact. It was particularly concerning that Harvey Boulter, who was present at the Dubai meeting and subsequently the defendant in a blackmail case, was treated so unquestioningly.

Last week's media frenzy was not unprecedented, and it happens where a necessary free press and politics collide, but I believe that there was, from some quarters, a personal vindictiveness—even hatred—that should worry all of us. But just as these events can bring out the worst in human nature, they also bring out the best. I have been touched, and frankly overwhelmed, by huge numbers of letters, e-mails and calls, from friends and strangers alike, in particular from my constituents in North Somerset. That has meant more to me than anyone can know.

I would also like to thank my parliamentary colleagues, including those in the Cabinet, for their strong and generous support, which shows politicians at their best—although I apologise that it may take me some time to get round to thanking all of you in person.

I am also indebted to my loyal staff for their support, in particular to my special advisers, who find themselves out of work as a result of my decision. I will miss the Ministry of Defence and the fantastic people who work there, military and civilian. It has been a life-changing experience and a great honour to work with some of the bravest and best people in our country. I am proud of what we have achieved there in 17 months and I will help in any way my successor, who I know will do an absolutely excellent job.

I would like to thank my family and friends for their love and support. It is not easy to watch someone you care about being attacked in a very aggressive and prolonged way. We choose this life; they do not. Of course, I would like above all to thank my wife, Jesme, who has dealt with this whole business with her usual grace, dignity and unstinting support.

Finally, it is not always easy to be in public life, but it is an honour, so I would like to thank all the party leaders, including the Prime Minister, who have enabled me to serve on the Front Bench for 17 consecutive years. I will give this Government my full support as they rescue our economy from the mess we inherited.

Most of all, I would like to thank my constituents in North Somerset for giving me the honour to represent them in the House of Commons and the opportunity to serve.

Point of Order

1.55 pm

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take this point of order if it is not about any of the matters about which we have just heard.

Thomas Docherty: This morning's Scottish newspapers have gained information from Alex Salmond and the Scottish National party Government about a commercially sensitive deal for a £1billion project that will potentially take place in my constituency. It is clearly unacceptable to the House for an SNP Government to breach such commercial discussions. Can you advise what opportunities would be available to the House to discuss this important issue in the coming days?

Mr Speaker: I think I can. I can advise the hon. Gentleman, a doughty and indefatigable campaigner on behalf of his constituents, to use every ounce—and there are many—of his ingenuity, through the Order Paper and in other ways, further and at greater length to draw attention to his dissatisfaction. I feel sure that that is what he will do.

Fee Charging Debt Management Companies (Promotion of Free Debt Management Advice)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.55 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab):I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require fee charging debt management companies to inform potential clients of the availability of free advice on debt management; and for connected purposes.

I have brought forward this Bill to level the playing field between the fee-charging debt management companies, which can spend a considerable amount of money on advertising, and the free agencies, which put all their money into providing a service, and which consequently might not be as well known. In fact, a Google search for "debt advice", or even for "citizens advice" brings up two debt managements companies at the top of the list, which promise to

"wipe off 75% of your debts".

Individuals who are looking for a solution to their debts are essentially making a distress purchase. They have realised that their debts are mounting and made that difficult decision to seek help to deal with them. However, searching and deciding on a debt management solution is not like looking for other services. Many people have struggled alone for a considerable time and feel ashamed; they might not have told even their family and friends. It is not like going to a neighbour and asking them to recommend a plumber, and I have never yet heard of anyone asking their mates in the pub whether they have been in debt and who helped them to get out of it.

Instead people turn to the internet or advertisements, or even to a company that has cold-called them. If they are lucky, they go to a citizens advice bureau, but very few have heard of Payplan, National Debtline or the Consumer Credit Counselling Service, which could all help with free solutions tailored to the individual.

What is the problem with fee-charging debt management agencies, beyond the obvious contradiction of charging individuals to get out of their debts? It is estimated that 375,000 people in the UK are on commercially provided debt management plans, costing them £250 million in debt management fees each year. The CCCS estimates that for a debt of £30,000, a client of a debt management company pays £6,000 in fees to that company, and that they extend the life of their debt for 18 months.

Unfortunately, too many of those companies take advantage of people when they are at their most vulnerable. Many people end up in a worse financial situation than when they first sought help. There is significant evidence of companies providing misleading information about their services. They claim to be able to write off debts and charges, and to give free advice, although fees are involved. There is also evidence of some payday lenders acting as an introducer to a debt management company. If that is not a case of, "We'll get you into debt and then tell you about somebody who you can pay to get out of it," I do not know what is.

It has been reported that rather than promoting free debt advice, some fee-charging companies have told callers that the CAB is not a specialist money adviser, and not to deal with it on a one-to-one basis. One individual approached a bureau for help after a company refused to cancel a plan that he signed up for within the 14-day cooling-off period. After the CAB intervened the agreement was cancelled, but the company told the client that the bureau would not contact the creditors, so she risked court action by doing what she was doing. High management fees, particularly up-front fees, can also be a particular problem. In one case, an individual was cold-called by a debt management company and paid an up-front fee of £1,000 before receiving any advice at all. I had a constituent who paid £300 to a fee-charging debt management agency, only to find out that they then had no disposable income, after which the agency referred them to my local CAB.

Up-front fees are not the only problem, however. Ongoing fees are also an issue, as companies need to recoup their costs early in the life of the agreement. When I worked for an advice agency, I saw a client who had been paying £80 a month to a debt management company for six months, not one penny of which had gone to her creditors. She said that she did not know where to go, so she looked on the internet and contacted the company. She was considerably upset when she realised that her debt had actually increased, despite those payments, because the interest had not been frozen. Also, debt management companies cannot and do not offer the full range of debt remedies available to an individual, and on occasion have even failed to inform clients of the need to pay their priority creditors first. Another CAB client reported that she was encouraged to make offers via a debt management company to her non-priority creditors, for which they took a fee. As a result she struggled with her mortgage payments, fell into arrears and is now worried about losing her home.

The number of complaints to the Financial Ombudsman Service is rising. There have been 457 new complaints in 2010-11, a staggering 54% of which were upheld in favour of the consumer. The complaints generally fall into two categories. The first is poor administration: money paid to a company is kept in that company's accounts for a considerable time rather than being paid to the creditors. The second is when, as I have described, a high proportion of the money paid is retained by the company to cover its costs rather than being paid to creditors. This demonstrates that it is not only the individuals who suffer detriment but their creditors, who could be paid much more money more quickly.

It is surely obvious, therefore, that making people aware of free quality agencies, which make sure that all the money paid goes to the creditors, will benefit both parties. An argument often used by the fee-charging sector is that there is insufficient capacity in the free sector. I agree that this needs to be carefully monitored and that a sustainable cross-governmental strategy for the provision of free debt advice is essential. However, a recent partnership between the CCCS and Citizens Advice has demonstrated that the agencies are working together to direct people to the most appropriate form of advice and to ensure that the most expensive form of delivery, the face-to-face advice, is kept for the people who need it most—the most vulnerable—and that people do not have to turn to the fee-charging debt management sector through lack of available free advice.

No one should suffer through ignorance of the services available to help them, and I believe that the Bill will provide for individuals to be informed of the full range of agencies able to support them, instead of allowing them to fall into the hands of some of the fee-charging companies that propel them into further debt and despair.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Yvonne Fovargue, Nic Dakin, Phil Wilson, Sheila Gilmore, Alex Cunningham, Teresa Pearce, Justin Tomlinson, Damian Hinds, Tracey Crouch, Tessa Munt, Jonathan Edwards and Dr Julian Huppert present the Bill.

Yvonne Fovargue accordingly presented the Bill

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2012, and to be printed (Bill 237).

Opposition Day

[UNALLOTTED DAY]

Energy Prices

[Relevant documents: The Fourth Report from the Energy and Climate Change Committee, Electricity Market Reform, HC 742 and the Government response, HC 1448, and the Sixth Report from the Committee, Ofgem's Retail Market Review, HC 1046, and the Government response, HC 1544.]

2.4 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the energy market does not serve the public interest and is in need of urgent reform; notes with concern research by OFGEM showing that average household energy bills have risen, while energy companies' profit margins have soared; recognises that, with a cold winter forecast and Government support cut, millions of families will struggle to heat their homes; believes that energy tariffs are confusing and unfair, meaning that 80 per cent. of people currently pay more for their energy than they need to, and that consumers who try to switch are often given inaccurate information; further believes that to tackle climate change, build a new low carbon economy and make the UK a world leader in green energy, which will bring new industry and jobs to the UK, people need to know that the energy market is fair; and calls on the Government to investigate mis-selling and ensure consumers are compensated, introduce a simple format to be applied across all tariffs, so that people can compare the full range of energy deals at a glance, increase transparency by requiring energy companies to publish their trading data, reform the energy market to break the dominance of the Big Six by requiring them to sell power into a pool, allowing new businesses to enter the market, increasing competition and driving down energy bills for families and businesses, and demand that energy companies use their profits to help reduce energy bills this winter.

I am pleased to move this Opposition day motion, and it is good to see the Secretary of State in his place this afternoon; we were all concerned for his well-being after his no-show on "Newsnight" on Monday. It was the day of that amazing energy summit, yet he was nowhere to be seen. That tells us just how well the summit went. As today's report on fuel poverty highlights, the stakes could not have been higher: according to the National Grid Company's forecast last week, this winter could be as bitter as last year, which saw the coldest December on record. Moreover, energy bills have risen by more than 20% this year alone, driving inflation to the second highest level in Europe, and have risen by more than 50% in the past four years, which means that the average family is now paying £1,345 a year just to keep the lights on and the house warm.

That matters. People do not have a choice about whether to consume energy. At the same time as more than one quarter of families are struggling to afford their energy bills, more price rises are on the horizon and more families are worried about how they will make ends meet, yet energy companies are enjoying soaring profits. On Monday the Secretary of State got the big six energy firms, which between them control 99% of the market, into the same room. With them were consumer groups such as Which? and Consumer Focus. It was the ideal opportunity to get a grip on spiralling energy bills, but what was the big idea? What was the bold plan? What was the new policy?

We were given two words that will strike terror into the hearts of the big six energy firms, two words that will give reassurance to millions of families worried about how they are going to heat their homes this winter: "Go compare". I honestly thought that the Prime Minister was going to come dressed as the opera singer Gio Compario and force the summit's reluctant audience to endure a chorus. He might as well have done, for all the good that came out of it. Meanwhile, the Secretary of State could only look on—as the Prime Minister spoke and the public relations shots were taken—reduced to the role of the Prime Minister's meerkat.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that we should have been increasing generating capacity and building more nuclear power stations over the past 15 years?

Caroline Flint: That is why, as we left office, we set in train the opportunity to put in place a more balanced energy generation selection for everyone, and that is why many of those policies are now being carried forward by the present Government.

But let us talk about this winter, this week, as the cold snap hits, and about the prices that families up and down the country are facing. Let us talk about the outcome of that energy stunt. There will be no overhaul of the energy market to break the stranglehold of the big six, there will be no radical simplification of the tariffs available, and there will not even be a pause for thought about whether cutting winter fuel payments for pensioners is the right thing to do, even though the Prime Minister accused Labour of lying when we warned, before the general election, that the Tories would cut them. The only message was: go compare. However, people can only go and compare if they have easy, accurate, transparent information on pricing, which we do not have. The number of tariffs on offer has risen from 180 three years ago to more than 400 today: there were more than 70 new tariffs just this year. That does not help consumer choice; it hinders it.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): My constituents, when they look at this vast array of different tariffs, step back and think, "Well, what's the point? These six firms are effectively in cahoots anyway. They are almost operating a cartel." They think, "Why bother wading through all this treacle and looking at the different tariffs, because we know that we'll switch to one company and then, two minutes later, it will up its prices too."

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend makes the point that many of our constituents are making about mis-selling, and the barrage of information that does not allow them to make a clear choice. If there are too many tariffs that are complicated to understand and difficult to compare, people cannot make informed decisions about which deal would be best for them.

Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): The right hon. Lady will be aware that energy prices soared in Britain between 1997 and 2010. Heating oil prices increased in real terms by 130%, gas prices by 71% and coal prices by 61%. Does she think that that inspires confidence in her approach?

Caroline Flint: That is one of the reasons why in 2007 we started discussions across Europe, as part of the new third energy package, to ensure that national regulators had more powers and to introduce more competition and transparency. That is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) has been calling for ever since he was Energy Secretary, including now, as leader of the Labour party. It is interesting that we are only now beginning to see signs that the Government are getting behind the Miliband deal. *[Laughter.]* It is absolutely true.

The Secretary of State likes to lecture us about the need to check and switch, but what does his own Energy Minister say? Earlier this year he poured his heart out to the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change about his struggle to find a cheaper deal. He said:

> "I went on line to compare my tariffs and I was so confused by the options that I decided to stick where I was".

That is what is happening to our constituents up and down the country. If the Minister himself cannot work out how to get a better deal, what hope is there for the rest of us? No wonder 80% of people are paying more for their energy than they need to.

Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I recognise the passion with which the right hon. Lady speaks. I share her passion, because many people in my constituency, particularly pensioners, have been struck with fuel poverty. However, I am beginning to ask myself whether she has been asleep for the last 13 years as prices have gone up. This has not suddenly happened overnight; the problem has got increasingly worse over the last 13 years. What does she say about that?

Caroline Flint: I am afraid that the problem has got even worse in the last year. Prices have been going up, even though wholesale prices have been going down. In its recent reports Ofgem has quite rightly complained about the way the energy big six blame wholesale prices when they put their prices up, but when wholesale prices go down they are not as quick to send them down the other way. It is just not good enough.

Sandra Osborne (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that shopping around, as people are being told to do, is a totally hopeless choice when they are suffering so badly, in many different ways, from rising prices, and not just fuel prices? Given the profits that the energy companies are making, does she think that they should make a contribution by cutting prices?

Caroline Flint: Absolutely, and that is in our motion today. Every Member of this House has a chance to vote to urge the energy companies to share some of their profits with the people who are their customers and to get prices down. As my hon. Friends have said, the problem is that even when people try to find a better package they do not get the right information.

Mr Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): Are things not, in fact, even worse than that? People can reduce the amount that they pay by switching only if they pay by direct debit, which acts against those on the lowest incomes who do not have bank accounts, and those of our constituents who do not wish to set up direct debits as they want the ability to decide which bills they pay when, in these difficult times.

Caroline Flint: Absolutely. There is no point in the companies having a system that does not recognise the situation of ordinary families. The National Pensioners Convention talks about the fact that fewer than six in 10 pensioners have access to a computer to go online. It is not fair or right. The onus should be on the companies, not the public. However, all the Secretary of State could do this week was blame the public: "It's your fault you're not getting out there and getting a better deal. It's your fault you're not saving yourselves £200 a time." He has got a lot to answer for, because he has just sat back and let people suffer.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): The right hon. Lady bemoans the unfairness in the direct debit discounts and the way in which those suffering from fuel poverty are treated by the system—there is also an issue with rising block tariffs—but all those things happened in the 13 years of the Labour Government. She is absolutely right to raise those important issues, but what did her Government do in that time to address them?

Caroline Flint: For a start, we had the most ambitious programme to help people in fuel poverty deal with their bills—the Government are cutting those measures—but we also started discussions across Europe about having Europe-wide legislation to tackle some of those issues by not only giving greater powers to regulators but ensuring more openness and transparency. I will talk about this more later, but I am sad to say that we are seven months overdue in implementing that legislation and putting into statute powers that we can use to control parts of the market. Perhaps the Secretary of State will say something more about why the package that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was negotiating when he was Climate Change Secretary has not been implemented.

Research published by the consumer group Which? showed that when people contacted the big six energy firms to ask how they could save money—that is, when they made the effort that the Secretary of State lectures us about—a third of them were given misleading advice. Either those customers were deliberately misled or the tariffs were so complicated that not even the staff selling them understood them. Can we imagine any other product or service where we would accept four out of five customers being overcharged—not just once, but time and time again—and nothing being done about it? When four out of five families are paying over the odds for their electricity and gas it shows how out of touch this Government are to lecture people about shopping around.

People do not want a Government who blame them for the fact that their energy bills have gone up. Families and businesses that do the right thing, work hard and play by the rules cannot understand why this Government are not only allowing electricity and gas companies to increase bills by so much, but seem to be apologising on their behalf. On Monday the Energy Secretary told the "Today" programme:

> "Energy companies are not the Salvation Army",

and said that he expected them to

> "earn respectable returns for their shareholders".

We know that the energy companies are not the Salvation Army, but it should not be Government policy to drive people into the arms of the Salvation Army either.

Stephen Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Can the right hon. Lady explain why, in 2000, the Labour Government set a 10-year target of securing

[Stephen Barclay]

10% of electricity from renewables, with a starting point of 2.7%, yet failed to achieve it, adding only 6% in 10 years? In 2009 the current Leader of the Opposition set a legally binding target of 31%—in other words, signing us up to deliver 21% extra when we had already failed to achieve the 10% target in the preceding 10 years. Could she please explain that?

Caroline Flint: I am happy to support the Labour Government's ambitious plans to be at the forefront of supporting renewable energy—and also, I should add, cracking the whip to make the energy companies play their part. Part of the problem is that the energy companies seemed to be on a mission to make us use more energy and pay more, rather than helping us to reduce our energy consumption and therefore pay less. We have nothing to apologise for on that front. What we are talking about today is what is happening this week, as the frost hits, and this winter, when people will face not only high energy bills but higher food prices, and wage freezes in the public and private sectors, in a country where unemployment is going up and people are feeling the squeeze on all fronts.

The question is: what can this Government do about that now? The answer, from Monday's energy summit, seems to be: precious little. We do not think that this Government are doing enough. On Monday the Secretary of State could not bring himself to question whether it is right, at a time when millions of families and businesses are struggling with energy bills, that energy companies should be enjoying soaring profit margins, which are up more than eightfold since June. We do not think that it is, which is why we welcome *The Sun*'s "Keep it Down" campaign, and why we said that the Government should have used Monday's summit to tell the energy giants to give up some of their profits and cut bills this winter. Was it any surprise that the BBC correspondent reported that the energy companies were "delighted" with the outcome of the summit? Well, they would be, because they were not asked to do anything.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. Lady agree that the energy companies need to be regulated, and that, along with regulation, we need initiatives to reduce the supply of energy that they get, over a 12-month or even a 24-month period? Does she also agree that such arrangements would need to be regulated and guaranteed under legislation? Regulation of the companies and a reduction in the supplies that they give out, guaranteed by legislation, will be the way forward.

Caroline Flint: We are clearly on record as saying that we need to reform this distorted market. We need openness and transparency, and we need simpler tariffs. It is not enough just to tell people to navigate themselves around the increasing number of available tariffs that are no good. This is also about breaking up the big six and opening up the energy market to new suppliers. We are clear about that, and today we are forcing the Government to tell the House whether they, too, are clear about it.

John Robertson (Glasgow North West) (Lab): Has my right hon. Friend had a chance to look at John Hills's report on fuel poverty? He talks about the thousands of people who will die from hypothermia this winter. Does not that make any arguments about who is at fault completely superfluous? The fact is that we have to prevent those people from dying. What are the Government going to do about this? Are they going to put profit before people's lives?

Caroline Flint: I was pleased to be able to have a meeting with John Hills this morning to discuss his report. I would not want to make a direct comparison in this regard, but it is telling that more people die of cold in the winter than die on our roads. This is about recognising that, while certain actions will take time, we need to determine what can be done here and now. The sad thing is that Ministers are lecturing families and firms about insulating and saving, even though they have cut Warm Front by 70% and will not give anyone any information about their green deal for homes, which will not be ready for another year anyway. Labour invested more than £300 million in Warm Front during our last year in office, helping families to keep warm and save energy. We helped home owners on modest incomes to modernise their heating systems, but today that scheme has a budget of just £110 million, and it is due to end in April 2013. The Government could take action right now: they could also stand up to the energy companies and tell them to help people to help themselves. In doing that, they could perhaps save some lives.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I agree with my right hon. Friend that we should be challenging the big six over their excessive profits. She is also right to point out, in relation to the Government's responsibilities, what Warm Front did to reduce fuel poverty. What does she think about the Government's cutting of winter fuel payments and replacing social tariffs with a poorly designed system? We must press the Government about those changes.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend brings to the House the expertise of a public health expert, and she makes an excellent point. How people live, and the homes and communities that they live in, are important to their physical well-being. For example, 80-year-old widows will lose £100 this winter that would have helped to heat their homes. And by the way, the Prime Minister had the brass neck to tell the public to check out free insulation, but he forgot to say that the insulation schemes run by the energy companies exist only because Labour legislated to require them to spend £300 million every year on reducing fuel poverty.

Robert Flello: My right hon. Friend will recall, as will most Members when the Government take us back to the 1980s, that it was Edwina Currie who said that pensioners had to stay in one room with a flask beside them, knitting themselves scarves and hats to keep warm. We are going back to that same territory, are we not?

Caroline Flint: I am afraid that Edwina Currie was in the news again only last week, when she said that she was not aware of anyone who could not afford to eat. People up and down the country are, however, facing the choice between keeping warm and having a hot meal. The sad thing is that many older people often make such sacrifices and keep quiet about them; they suffer on their own. In the voluntary sector, we are also seeing cuts to the services that support those people and help them to get access to their rights and to the deals that they deserve. This is a sorry tale of a sorry Government.

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): May I draw the attention of my right hon. Friend to the report on fuel poverty by the Office of Fair Trading, which was published this week? She asks what is being done. The report described the stopping of practices by BoilerJuice—something that was set up on her watch—which allowed only one company to be in a position to market its products, namely DCC. Will she "go compare" that?

Caroline Flint: Whatever we do in public policy, the important thing is always to see whether it is hitting the mark and working as best it can. Does that mean that policies always stay the same? No, it does not.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for calling me his right hon. Friend, but I must challenge him and the Secretary of State over Labour's record on supporting families coping with their energy needs. I challenge the Secretary of State to deny that the Decent Homes programme, which involved the modernisation of 1.5 million homes, reduced energy consumption. I defy him to say that the code for sustainable homes did not improve the energy efficiency of new properties. I defy him to say that Warm Front did not reduce energy bills for more than 2 million households. I also defy him to say that the car scrappage scheme did not remove hundreds of thousands of old cars from Britain's roads and replace them with more fuel-efficient vehicles with lower emissions. I challenge him to own up to the House today to the fact that the regulations that his Government are introducing, seven months after they were required, arise from the third energy package agreed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North when he was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. Yes, it was Labour that agreed the legal agreement across the European Union to make the gas and electricity markets more competitive, to give new powers to the regulator, to reveal the financial records of the energy giants and to put in place a more competitive market that new suppliers could enter. The role of this Government, 18 months into office, is to delay the process of implementation.

Perhaps the Secretary of State is not just the Prime Minister's meerkat; perhaps he is also the Chancellor's poodle. Following the Osborne doctrine, which states, "We are going to cut our carbon emissions no slower, but no faster, than other countries in Europe", perhaps he now believes that, as the Chancellor said,

> "a decade of environmental laws and regulations are piling costs on the energy bills of households and companies."

Perhaps that is why, this week, the Secretary of State failed to stand up to companies over pricing, why he failed to express the anger that the public feel towards the energy giants, and why he meekly agreed to let the energy giants pledge not to raise their prices over the winter only after they had already increased them.

People expect, and deserve, a Government with the courage to stand up to powerful vested interests. This Government cannot even stand up to their own Back Benchers. A survey last year showed that, in spite of the overwhelming scientific consensus, one third of Tory MPs are climate change deniers who doubt the existence of climate change and its link to human activity. As ever, we are particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) for the expertise that she brings to all matters scientific. On Monday, she solved an issue that has evaded scientists for generations when she told Radio 5:

> "You can't put solar panels on children's shoes."

I am glad that that thorny issue has been resolved once and for all, but this is all part of the background to the comments of the Chancellor at the Tory party conference, when he openly attacked low-carbon businesses to get cheap applause from Tory delegates. The truth is that this Government are not only out of touch but wedded to an out-of-date orthodoxy which, for too long, has allowed the City and companies such as the privatised electricity suppliers to do what they want at the expense of everyone else.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I note what the right hon. Lady has said about her support for the Climate Change Act 2008, but will she spell out for us what the cost of the renewables obligation has been for electricity consumers in the United Kingdom this year?

Caroline Flint: What will be the cost if we rely on fossil fuels for ever more? What difficulties would that create, in terms not only of fuel costs but of security of supply? I refer the hon. Gentleman to a report that I believe came from both Ofgem and the Department of Energy and Climate Change last year, which outlined that something less than 5% of the price of bills was connected to investment in renewables. Of course we have to look for a balance, but I am focusing on something that we should all be concerned about. Even the Government have admitted that people are paying too high a price for their bills because these tariffs are sold in a misleading way so that people do not get a decent deal. On top of that, we have only the six big energy giants in the market, which needs to be broken up and radically reformed. That is something we should focus our attention on, along with help to people and businesses to make their homes and businesses more energy-efficient so they can pull down the costs of energy over time. There is no going back, however, to an old system of energy supply; that will not help anyone.

John Robertson: What does my right hon. Friend say to people in the poorer parts of my constituency where energy efficiency will not work? People can do nothing with the housing they have got, but they have to live somewhere. The thing that makes the biggest impression on them is the price. If they are going to get screwed by the price from the energy companies, they are going to have to work out how they are to live. What do we do with people like that? We can talk all we like about efficiency, but it does nothing for these poor people.

Caroline Flint: We stand up for them. We stand up for them when they are not getting the best deal they can for their energy. We also stand up for them by ensuring that low-income homes are supported through Government schemes, whether that is Warm Front or the winter fuel allowance for older people, but those are being cut by the Government. That is what we do and what we look at. In the long term, we look at how we live our lives and where we live and, with Government leadership and support, we help business to do the right thing to help people not to be behind the curve on energy efficiency

[Caroline Flint]

and lowering bills. We also look at what happens now, which is why our motion demands that energy companies use some of their profits to help people, particularly the most vulnerable in our communities.

The Government do not understand the reality for families who struggle to pay the bills at the end of the month or the reality for vulnerable people who must make choices about whether to heat their home or have a hot meal. The same applies to families who believe in greening their homes, do their recycling, have low-energy light bulbs and have insulated their homes, yet still find that under the complex, distorted tariffs they pay more for every unit of energy they use—not to mention the businesses trying to keep their head above water because of an austerity programme that is not working for Britain.

Robert Flello: On that specific point, families face a double whammy, as not only have their own gas and electricity bills gone up, but the businesses that supply them with food and other services have seen their bills go up.

Caroline Flint: Yes, and all this takes place in an environment in which unemployment is going up and growth is going down. This toxic cocktail of Government policies is not only not helping us get to a better place for our economy, but is actually making it far worse.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Does the right hon. Lady share my particular concern for the south-west, given that if we add energy bills at an average of £1,300 to the water bills at £517, people are looking at spending 8% of their average income on utility bills?

Caroline Flint: The hon. Lady speaks up for the south-west and I know that she has raised questions a number of times about water in the south-west. Again, however, I would have to say that she should speak to her leader and to the Secretary of State about what they are doing to challenge these utility companies over how they supply, and she should recognise the difficulties faced across our country. She also needs to recognise particular difficulties within regions as well as within the country.

Stephen Barclay: A central theme of the right hon. Lady's remarks seems to be gas prices and bills for consumers. Will she remind us how much gas bills went up in real terms between 1997 and 2010?

Caroline Flint: I understand that the wholesale price has gone down from its peak in 2008 by two thirds; in fact, wholesale prices have been going down in the last month. That poses the question: why do we hear from the energy companies when they say that prices are going up, but when the prices are going down we do not hear from them so loudly? Ofgem has said it is not good enough that when the energy companies claim that wholesale prices are going up, the price to consumers goes up like a rocket, but when they come down, the price comes down like feathers. The truth is that it is a complex market and it is difficult. We are not an island that can control everything, but we should control the way in which the energy companies are expected to satisfy us and the public about how they run their tariffs, and they should open their books to show transparency so we can see at what price they buy and at what price they sell, to ensure that we get a better deal.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Unemployment is at the highest level for 20 years, we have an austerity programme that makes the eyes water, inflation at over 5% and on top of that we face the biggest squeeze on living standards in a generation. Is it not imperative that the Government do something about rising energy prices, which do more than anything else to harm families' budgets, making it hard for them to keep up a decent standard of living?

Caroline Flint: I agree with my hon. Friend. Given all the spin before the energy summit on Monday, it was disappointing that all that came out of it was that letters would be written to 8 million households telling them to check, switch, insulate and save. I am sorry, but that is not good enough. It is hard to check, switch, insulate and save when it is so incredibly difficult to navigate a way through the tariff system and people are never quite sure, even if they get what looks like a good deal, whether it is going to be a good deal down the road. That is why some of the tariffs that are fixed for 12 months have been so disappointing; many people have realised that they are not as good as they were claimed to be.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Before I came to this place, I worked for Citizens Advice, so I know that energy poverty has led to one of the greatest increases in inquiries. At the time, I argued for the introduction of a mandatory social tariff on behalf of those in the fuel poverty group, removing them from the market that was clearly not working. Would the Labour Front-Bench team agree with such a radical proposal?

Caroline Flint: We had something like that, but I am afraid that the present Government have taken it away. If we want to get to the root of the problem, we have to think about radically reforming how the energy market works. We have to create a dynamic and more open energy market that deals with climate change and operates in the interests of the consumer, not the vested interests of the few.

At the Labour party conference, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North called for reform to the energy market to end the dominance of the big six and get a fairer deal for the people of Britain. While the Government have been failing to act to prevent sky-high energy price rises, Labour has been leading the debate and is coming up with radical ideas to reform our energy market and deliver significant reductions in gas and electricity prices for millions of consumers. Our plans would provide immediate help to millions of families now and reform the energy industry to provide a new bargain in the future.

Laura Sandys (South Thanet) (Con): The right hon. Lady is making a critique of the current regulatory regime, which was the Labour Government's regime. What we are doing is reforming the electricity market and there is also Ofgem's retail market review. Those are the steps taken forward, and we will ensure that they deliver value for the consumer. The previous Government published 32 Green Papers and consultations and passed two pieces of legislation, so there was a lot of inactivity over the past 13 years.

Caroline Flint: I think I have already said that, back in 2007, we embarked on securing Europe-wide support for reform of the energy market. I am afraid to say that the negotiations on which the leader of the Labour party led have yet to be implemented. They are seven months overdue; they could have been implemented in this country seven months ago, but it has not happened yet. We are calling for further radical restructuring: we have argued for the energy giants to put all their power into a pool, but we have not heard that echoed by the Government. We have made many demands for transparent data to go to the regulator, but again we have not heard that echoed by the Government.

Laura Sandys *rose—*

Caroline Flint: I will continue to expand on my theme a little, if I may, but I will be happy for the hon. Lady to intervene again if I have time.

If we want to get to the root of the problem, we must talk about reform, and our plans would provide immediate help for millions of families. First, we must deal with the sheer number and complexity of energy tariffs, which are extremely confusing and unfair. They hit loyal customers and penalise those who use less energy, and they really must be reformed. We propose a simple new tariff structure, which will be clearer and fairer and which will help all energy customers to get a better deal. It would work like a phone bill, with a daily standing charge and a cost per unit for the energy used.

Simplifying the pricing of energy would make it much easier for people to compare deals, work out which is the cheapest for them, and ditch the ones that are ripping them off. We need to get rid of expensive primary units and unregulated standing charges, so that people are no longer penalised for being low energy users, which is quite ridiculous. Instead of his "Check, switch, insulate" mantra, could the Secretary of State not try "Simple, honest, straightforward"? That might work better for customers.

What about redress? I understand that only two days ago, on breakfast TV, when asked about our proposal for a thorough investigation of past mis-selling and compensation for customers who have been ripped off, the Secretary of State suggested that that was not worth doing because it would delay other reforms. Labour Members will accept new protection measures as they are introduced, and we agreed that that should happen throughout Europe when we were in office. However—let me challenge the Secretary of State by repeating this—we are saying today that a full investigation into past mis-selling must be initiated, and that those who have been ripped off must be fully compensated.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): In fact, what I said was not worth doing was referring the matter to the Competition Commission, because of the delays that it would involve.

Caroline Flint: I am not sure whether that means that the Secretary of State now supports our demand for a full investigation and redress for consumers who have been ripped off.

Chris Huhne: I announced some weeks ago that we were considering redress for consumers. Moreover, we have said that it should not be just a question of a rap across the knuckles or indeed a fine, but that there should be a possibility of redress for consumers as well.

Caroline Flint: Obviously we will explore that in a little more detail, but I think it is clear that those who have mis-sold a package must pay back to people what they have lost through that, and must pay them compensation. It is clear that the fines are not working, because every time a consumer organisation conducts another survey, it finds more evidence of mis-selling. I think that this is quite straightforward, and I do not see why we need to go on talking about it. Let us just get on with it.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Energy and Climate Change Committee, of which I am a member, should be praised for initiating the current inquiries? Already four of the big six have decided to stop doorstep selling, and we need to push that further. The Secretary of State knows that these companies are on the run; now he must put the boot into the big six, and ensure that our customers receive the compensation that they deserve. We need not measly words, but action.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I pay due respect to all the members of the Select Committee. They have done fantastic work on our behalf, highlighting some of the problems caused by the operation of the energy market and energy companies. It is about time that the Government stood up to the energy giants, because this is not good enough. I do not know how energy chief executives can go on television and brazen it out, talking about what their companies are doing for customers, when 80% of people are not on the best deal for them, and mis-selling appears to have reached the level that is being discussed in the Chamber and beyond. It is a disgrace, and the very least that those companies should do is fess up and pay back.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): It is not just the mis-selling itself, but the fact that it has taken place within the confines of what is clearly a rigged market, that is such an utter disgrace. It is clear that the levels of profit per customer in all the companies in the market are rising very quickly and will fall very slowly, and that is of concern to every Member in the House.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend is right. People are not stupid, but sometimes I feel that the leaders in this country treat them as if they were. That certainly seemed to be the case on Monday, after the energy summit. People feel distrust, and they are right to feel distrust because of what has happened to them.

I am sure that we all have stories of our own experience. For instance, the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry), tried to work out what was the best tariff for him, and then gave up on it. Yet people are being blamed for sticking to the same supplier because they too have given up, although some of those whom we represent have more stresses to deal with in life than we have. Spending half the day sorting out an energy bill—if they can devote that much time to

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it—is just one item in a long list of things with which they are having to cope, and they are not being helped by the policies of this Government.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): It is all very well for the Prime Minister to tell people that they should insulate their homes. It is true that they should do that, but some of the poorest people in the country live in private rented accommodation. They turn up in my surgery all the time. There are some excellent private landlords, but there are also many who are simply not interested in insulating their houses, and do not care how high their bills are.

Caroline Flint: We have been campaigning for something to be done about that from 2016, but I understand that the Government do not intend to do anything until 2018, and that too is a disgrace. We must also look much more closely at what happens to housing benefit in the private rented sector, and ensure that that sector is not left behind. We should consider incentives, but we should also consider introducing a bit of stick where it is necessary.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): One in four children in Swansea currently live in absolute poverty, which means that every day a choice must be made between eating and heating. Should the Government not put at the top of their agenda the opportunities at their disposal to target support at those in greatest need, particularly households containing children in poverty?

Caroline Flint: I agree. There are measures that Government can take. However, they can also show leadership and exert moral pressure on the energy companies to be fairer and consider sharing some of their profits with those who are most in need, at the very least.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): The Secretary of State has focused on the fact that switching suppliers might save people as much as £200. Is that not a bit rich, given that the energy companies' profit per person is £125? Most people will never get around to switching, and meanwhile the big six are raking it in.

Caroline Flint: If it is true that every customer who followed the Energy Secretary's advice could save £200, why do the companies not make it easier for customers by simply reducing their prices? The latest report does indeed show that their profit margins are £125 a head, up from £15 a head in June. If that does not set the alarm bells ringing in Government, I do not know what will.

As Members have pointed out—including, to some extent, Government Members—reforming the way in which energy is priced and sold will only ever work if there is genuine competition in the energy market. There is no such competition at present. The market is dominated by just six firms, which supply more than 99% of electricity and gas.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Flint: No. I will not take any more interventions, because I want to leave time for other Members on both sides of the House to contribute.

The problem is that when wholesale prices go up, so do people's bills, but when wholesale prices come down, bills do not. That is because of the lack of transparency in the market. The companies that generate energy sell it to themselves, and then on to customers. If the few big dominant firms were forced to sell the power that they generate to any retailer, companies such as supermarkets and others could come into the market, there would be more competition, and the upward pressure on prices would be eased.

In the long term, however, the only way in which we will deal with rising energy prices is by investing in new renewable sources of energy. The challenge is clear. A quarter of our generation capacity will close in the next 10 years, and we need to attract some £200 billion of investment. If we do not do that, energy bills may rise further still, by hundreds of pounds a year.

As a result of the uncertainty this Government have created, the UK is falling behind with investment in new low-carbon generation. Investment that should be coming to the United Kingdom, supporting jobs, growth and industry in this country, is now going overseas. Last year, when we left office, the UK was ranked third in the world for investment in green growth. Today, because of the choices made by the present Government, we have slipped 10 places to 13th, falling behind countries such as Brazil, India and China. That is why the Chancellor was wrong when he said the UK should not try to get ahead of other countries in developing our green industries; we should do that. We should be ambitious for our country; we should be a world leader on the green economy. That is good for consumers because in the long run it will bring down prices. It is good for our environment because it gets our carbon emissions down. It is good for our energy security because it means we are less affected by events overseas. It is good for our economy too, because it creates jobs and supports growth at a time when we need that more than ever.

I am afraid that we have a Government who are out of touch and unable to stand up to powerful vested interests on energy prices on behalf of the people of this country. They are out of touch when they tell people that they are to blame for rising energy bills. They are out of touch when they cut help for pensioners at a time when prices are rising and a cold winter is on the way. They are also out of touch when they insult people by saying "Check, switch" and "insulate to save."

The public will check; they will check how their family voted at the last election and they will switch to Labour—as Liberal Democrat voters did in their droves in May. They will try to insulate themselves from the hardships this Government are raining down on them, and in a few years they will save themselves and this country from this terrible coalition.

The public do not need lectures from Government. They want leadership, and today there is a very clear choice before the House: vote to stand up to the energy companies and take action; vote for simpler and fairer tariffs; vote for justice and redress for the victims of mis-selling; vote to open the books and shine a light on how energy is bought and sold; vote to break the stranglehold of the big six and create an open and competitive energy market; vote to tell the energy companies to use their profits to cut bills now. I commend the motion to the House.

2.51 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Chris Huhne): The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) brings a wealth of Government experience to her brief, and I congratulate her on her appointment and on securing today's debate. She has a particularly difficult Opposition Front-Bench role as her boss, the Leader of the Opposition, was the former Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. He held that post for almost two years, and presided over the last Government's energy and climate change policies. It is his legacy that I am having to deal with.

As we did not hear much from the right hon. Lady about that legacy, I would like to remind her of it. First, we inherited a situation whereby we ranked 25th out of 27 European Union member states on renewable energy. No turf was turned for any new nuclear power stations. There was no progress on that throughout the 13 years the Labour Government were in office.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Huhne: Carbon capture and storage is a crucial technology if we are to ensure that the coal mines and miners in this country have ongoing employment, but in 2007 the Peterhead project was cancelled, despite the competition, with the consequence that we have now further delayed addressing this issue.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Huhne: There was not a single comprehensive energy saving package throughout the time of the last Labour Government, whereas in our first year in office, we have proposed in the Energy Bill a comprehensive package to make sure that householders can save energy, so that we end the scandal we inherited from the right hon. Lady and her colleagues of householders in our country spending more on their energy every year than people do in Sweden, where temperatures are 7° lower than here. That highlights the waste we inherited.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If the right hon. Gentleman does not wish to give way, he cannot be made to do so. I ask Members to be patient with him.

Chris Huhne: I will happily give way in a moment, but having listed a few legacy issues that we are attempting to deal with, I should make one final point. The leader of the Labour party held this portfolio for almost two years, but only now that he no longer has any power to do anything does he keep coming up with interesting ideas. He recently came up with the interesting idea—I do not agree with it but it is an interesting proposal—that the energy companies should be broken up and should no longer be vertically integrated. However, I can see no such proposal in the Opposition motion. Why is that? Is the right hon. Lady already resiling from the proposal that her boss made just a few weeks ago?

Indeed, I read this motion very carefully expecting, as usual, to come across a number of points on which we could disagree, but I and my ministerial team have consulted, and we cannot disagree with it. We will not oppose it. I hope that the right hon. Lady asks her boss whether she was right not to propose that key idea he made a few weeks ago.

Huw Irranca-Davies *rose—*

Chris Huhne: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, who, sadly, has lost his Front-Bench role dealing with these issues. I, for one, thought he performed his duties rather well.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his civility. However, he is rewriting history yet again. What did he and his party do throughout the previous decade and longer when we were establishing the consensus on the need to build new nuclear? Also, would he care to comment on the fact that when we left office this country was one of the top five most attractive countries in the world for inward investment on renewables?

Chris Huhne: We do not need to go as far back as that. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the coalition reached an agreement which said that, given the overwhelming support for new nuclear from the Opposition and the Conservative party, it has a part to play. I refer him to my recent speech at the Royal Society in which I addressed how we intend to make sure that we do not repeat the mistakes on new nuclear generation that, sadly, so many Energy Secretaries made in the past.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Chris Huhne: I will make a little progress before giving way again.

Across the country, rising energy prices are hitting households hard. On top of increasing petrol and food costs, many households are facing an increase of more than £100 in their annual dual fuel bills. For those who are struggling, it can seem as if bills simply keep going up. I am sure that all Members will join me in expressing concern about that, but sympathy from the sidelines is not enough. It is our responsibility to do everything we can to help. That is why we are focusing on the things that will make a difference both this winter and in the long term.

First and foremost, consumers need to know how they can cut their energy bills right now. We need open and honest information, so people can see the savings they can make by checking their energy deal, switching tariffs or suppliers, and insulating their homes. One of the positive things to come out of Monday's energy summit was a commitment from the energy companies that, as part of the voluntary agreement, they will notify all their customers when there is a cheaper tariff than that which they are currently paying. That is a step forward. It is not the end of the story, but it is a step forward.

Mr Weir: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the choice of language is important? He says that we can reduce bills by switching and insulating, but is it not the case that, given the massive rise in energy prices, if people switch or insulate they may stop the rise being so big, but bills will keep rising? That is why people are being hit so hard. Wages are not rising, but bills are. Unless we can reduce bills, we will not help the situation.

Chris Huhne: That is a very good point. It is certainly the case that over the past year there has been a substantial increase in world gas prices because of the high growth in the far east, the demand for gas and the Fukushima nuclear accident. That substantial increase in gas prices has inevitably fed through to bills, but I think that people understand that, by getting a grip and comparing tariffs, they can curb that increase, and sometimes offset it entirely.

Ofgem is the independent regulator, and I have a lot of respect for the work it does. It has found that people could save £200 by switching, and I should point out that an additional £100 is available for simple energy insulation steps.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): One of my constituents has taken the trouble to analyse each section of his bill. He found that although the gas price—the actual energy price—had reduced from being 62% of his bill to 42%, his bill had increased. When he interrogated his supplier he found that the profit level it had built in had a 9% increase. In reality, it had taken that money, which was not demanded of it for energy sources, and put it into the profit level. That is why bills are increasing.

Chris Huhne: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, which is why we are happy not to oppose the motion. I agree that there are signs in this market of anti-competitive behaviour and we need to get a grip on that, which is exactly what this Government are doing in supporting what Ofgem—the independent regulator—is doing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Chris Huhne: I will make a little progress before I give way.

Our approach means working together across the consumer groups and the energy industry to get the message out about checking, switching and insulating. Earlier this week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I brought the energy suppliers, the consumer groups and Ofgem together to do precisely that. In the new year, Citizens Advice will co-ordinate a "Big Energy Week" campaign, and energy suppliers have put together winter help packages for consumers, which I am sure other hon. Members will welcome.

Geraint Davies: The right hon. Gentleman is saying that he wants to be a champion of consumer rights. He will be aware that the primary consumer watchdog on energy, Consumer Focus, which has mandatory statutory powers, is being abolished by his Government and those powers are being absorbed by Citizens Advice, which has enough on its plate with changes in legal aid, cuts and all the rest of it. Does he not accept that that change will disempower energy consumers, at least over that period of change, and that the powers of Consumer Focus are set in statute in a stronger way than those of Citizens Advice, which is a charity?

Chris Huhne: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on that. I care as passionately as he does about consumer rights on this issue. I spent some time on the board of Which?, the consumer association, so I will not be second to anyone on those particular issues. My experience—perhaps his differs—is that many of my constituents go first and foremost for advice on these issues to their citizens advice bureau, so that is an appropriate place to situate such advice.

When the coalition took office, some 400 separate tariffs were available. That is also part of the legacy we inherited from the time when the right hon. Lady's boss was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. This coalition Government have, in our Energy Bill—now the Energy Act 2011, as it received Royal Assent yesterday—taken powers to force companies to give straightforward information about cheaper tariffs. We are also working with Ofgem to cut the number of tariffs and make it easier to compare them. According to Ofgem, only 15% of households switched gas supplier last year and only 17% switched electricity supplier. Switching should be fast and easy, and we are cutting the time it takes to switch to just three weeks—that is another change that this Government have introduced. In addition, Citizens Advice and Ofgem announced record funding from suppliers for the "Energy Best Deal" campaign, which helps vulnerable consumers to shop around for the best deal.

John Robertson *rose*—

Chris Huhne: I cannot resist, although I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be raising a matter concerning fuel poverty. I wish he would because I will be able to respond.

John Robertson: My speech is full of stuff on fuel poverty, but I wish to pick up on one of the points that the Secretary of State made. He said that Sweden was using less energy than the United Kingdom, but that is wrong. According to the Swedish Government's own figures, Sweden uses twice as much energy as this country does, and the cost is more. In addition, according to the International Energy Agency, Sweden's energy use is substantially higher than that of the UK. I do not suppose he meant to mislead the House, but I think he must get his facts right.

Chris Huhne: The hon. Gentleman needs to examine the situation for households. It is clearly the case that Sweden has a lot of hydroelectricity and a lot of industries are very dependent on it. My point was about households and the household use of heating, which is key.

Millions of households could save just by switching tariffs or payment method. From now on, suppliers will write to customers to tell them about these savings—that is another outcome from Monday's energy summit.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab) *rose*—

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Weir *rose*—

Chris Huhne: I am going to make a bit of progress before giving way again. The hon. Member for Angus (Mr Weir) has already intervened once, so he will have to wait until I have taken interventions from some of the other hon. Members.

This winter, energy bills will show customers how to save money, encouraging them to call their supplier and check online for savings. They will also have access to advice.

Caroline Flint: The Secretary of State makes much of the fact that people will be able to save if they switch. What about the people who cannot use direct debit?

What about the people who have not got access to the internet or those who, even if they did, would find it difficult to navigate their way through?

Chris Huhne: The sort of people the right hon. Lady is talking about are the sort of people we are particularly targeting with our warm homes discount. I heard some of the interventions from Labour Members with mounting surprise, because one of the things that this Government have done, of which I am very proud, is to concentrate help on those most in need—those most vulnerable to rising fuel prices. Through the warm homes discount we have altered the previously voluntary arrangement. I say to Labour Members that their Government operated a purely voluntary arrangement with the big six, so cosy was the relationship between the big six and the right hon. Lady's boss. It was a voluntary, grace and favour arrangement, whereby support was provided for the most vulnerable. We did not have any truck with that. We decided that we were going to legislate on this, which is exactly what we did. As a result, we will have a two thirds increase in the support made available for these social discounts compared with what was available under the previous Labour Government. So on the matter of fuel poverty, we have been doing exactly the right thing, which is to concentrate support where it is most needed and to make sure that that support is available.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): The Secretary of State is making an excellent point about targeting resources where they are necessary. Will he congratulate Cornwall council and other councils that are taking exactly that approach and working in partnership with the voluntary sector to provide free insulation and other ways of helping people in fuel poverty to stay warm this winter?

Chris Huhne: I certainly will congratulate the hon. Lady's local council and every council, of all parties, on that work. I hope that we can maintain a cross-party and consensual view on this. Many councils, some Liberal Democrat-led, some Conservative-led and some Labour-led, have been pioneers in this area, and I want to see them do more. Leading on that is really important for our constituents, and it is something to which I pay great tribute.

People can save money on bills, but they can also save by using less energy in the first place. Far too many UK homes are not properly insulated. Loft and cavity wall insulation can save more than £100—we are talking about very simple changes. The big six energy suppliers, which supply 99% of UK households, all offer free or cut-price insulation, yet many householders still have not taken up the offer. So from December, 4 million of the most vulnerable energy customers will receive letters to tell them they are eligible for free or heavily discounted insulation to their loft or cavity walls. Many of these people will not necessarily save energy because they are currently too cold and keep their bills down. By having that insulation, they will be able to increase their comfort, and that is a very good thing to get through an extremely tough winter. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that one of the scandals in this country, which underpinned the work of the Hills fuel poverty review, is that 25,000 people die each winter because of the cold. We have to deal with that. As has been pointed out, it is a multiple of the number of people killed on the roads and it is a scandal that across this House—I am not going to cast further aspersions on the record of the previous Government—we have not tackled this issue with more vigour until now.

These letters will direct people to a dedicated independent helpline, as part of our programme to ensure an extra 3.5 million homes are properly insulated by the end of 2012. Next year we will also be rolling out the green deal to help even more households save money through energy efficiency.

We must also make sure that help is getting to those who need it most—the most vulnerable households. As I pointed out, discounts have risen very sharply under the coalition, and the extra support will be available this winter. We are requiring energy companies to provide help to about 2 million low-income households through the warm home discount.That is a discount of £120 for 600,000 of the poorest pensioners—substantially more than they have been getting until now. We are spending £110 million on heating and insulation for low-income and vulnerable households through Warm Front.

Caroline Flint: Is it not the case that only about one in 20 pensioners will benefit from the warm homes discount, whereas our social tariffs went to all vulnerable households? In addition, there are cuts of £100 in the winter fuel allowance for those over 80 and cuts for older people of £50. This all adds up when one takes into account the VAT increases and everything else that people have to pay the price for under this Government.

Chris Huhne: The right hon. Lady again makes a point about winter fuel payments which I should have picked her up on previously. She may not be aware of this, as she was not in the Department previously, but we have adopted precisely the policy of the previous Labour Government on winter fuel payments. We have left it completely unchanged. They increased winter fuel payments on a temporary basis and then proposed to bring them down, and we have kept exactly in line with that policy, so I am in no position to accept lectures on this matter from the Opposition as we are implementing the policy that they agreed.

Of course, cold weather payments will also be paid to households in areas with extended periods of very cold weather. Part of the green deal scheme will be designed specifically to provide affordable warmth to low-income, vulnerable households through heating and insulation measures. Those policies will make a difference this winter, next winter and every winter thereafter. However, we also need to take the right long-term decisions so that energy does not become unaffordable in future. We need to keep the lights on in the cheapest, cleanest way and to make sure that households get the best deal in the long term as well.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): The Secretary of State may be aware that north of my constituency a find of 200 trillion cubic feet of shale gas has been announced. That will make an enormous difference one way or another if it is genuine. Would he like to comment on that and the difference it might make to prices in future?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. Our overall energy policy is designed to be robust in the face of considerable uncertainties in relation

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to technologies and what is likely to happen to the price of particular fuels. If it transpires that the early indications we have received from Cuadrilla about the size of the find under Lancashire are correct, there will clearly be an impact on gas prices within the UK. We have already seen that gas prices in the United States are half of those in the UK and the rest of Europe and are even lower than the prices for gas in the far east. This is a very important development and all our policy framework is designed to make sure that we can provide affordable, clean electricity at the cheapest possible price to British consumers in the long run. If that means cheap gas, then obviously the technological imperative is to go forward with carbon capture and storage so that we can use that gas in an environmentally friendly manner. That is precisely why that is so important.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Huhne: I must make a bit of progress with my speech; otherwise I fear we will be here all night.

Over the next 10 years, we need £110 billion of investment in power plants and another £90 billion of investment in energy infrastructure to avoid the risk of black-outs. If we do not invest now to reduce our energy use and our dependence on fossil fuels in the long term, we will have to rely on ever more expensive imports. That will leave us at the mercy of global oil and gas prices and at the mercy of events in very volatile parts of the world. We have only to look at what has been happening in Libya and the rest of the middle east to see that. The impact on energy security and household bills will be worse. This is a very important way of insuring our country against the sort of economic shocks that we can otherwise expect.

That four-pronged strategy of energy saving, renewables, new nuclear and carbon capture and storage is absolutely essential.

Luciana Berger *rose—*

Chris Huhne: Is the hon. Lady about to ask about carbon capture and storage perhaps?

Luciana Berger: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. He said that energy saving was one of those prongs, and on energy saving he said only a moment ago that the Government are introducing the energy company obligation, which will replace Labour's carbon emissions reduction target and community energy saving programme. That ECO pot is not going to go just to homes in fuel poverty but will be split, with some money going to subsidise able-to-pay households. Will he tell us how much there will be in that ECO pot?

Chris Huhne: We will be bringing forward the consultation document on the green deal and the ECO subsidy shortly, and all those issues will be addressed. Clearly, we have to make sure that we are getting value for money on both the carbon reduction side and in reducing fuel poverty because they are both very important.

I want to make some remarks on carbon capture and storage, which was raised in Prime Minister's questions. Despite the fact that all the parties have worked extremely hard on the first carbon capture and storage demonstration project at Longannet, we have not been able to reach a satisfactory deal, as the Prime Minister pointed out. We will not, therefore, be proceeding with the project. That decision is purely about the viability of that particular project and is not a reflection on our commitment to the CCS programme; indeed, hon. Members will have heard me commit us to that very clearly a moment ago.

The long-term need for CCS remains as strong as ever. We will continue working across Government to start a more streamlined selection process as soon as possible and £1 billion will be available, as it was allocated in the comprehensive spending review, for that new process. Over the coming weeks, we will ensure that the lessons from that first process are fully learned and we now know that commercial-scale CCS projects are technically viable and are likely to be financially achievable. We also know more about the best way to procure these first-of-a-kind projects. Our findings will be published and made freely available on the Department of Energy and Climate Change website to help to speed up deployment of CCS both here and abroad. We will study those lessons closely as we develop the forthcoming CCS road map setting out our vision for CCS deployment.

Caroline Flint: I thank the Secretary of State for referring to the situation with carbon capture and storage projects around the country. Will he explain to the House how the Government will look to use the great deal of work and research that have been done at the plant in Scotland to make sure that the endeavours, hard work and ingenuity there are not lost but are supported?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful for that question. It is absolutely right; we have learned an enormous amount from that. A lot of work has gone into the negotiations and a lot of good engineering work has been done with the front-end engineering and design studies. They will all be published, if they have not been already, and will be made available to everyone. We are absolutely confident, as a result of this process, that we are able to go ahead with the CCS project within that budget. Unfortunately, at Longannet the difficulties were specific to that project, including the length of the pipeline between Longannet and the reservoirs, as well as other issues concerning the rest of the plant such as its upgrading to comply with the large combustion plant directive. As a result of the knowledge that we have acquired in that negotiation and as a result of those feed studies, we are confident that we will be able to take a project forward.

Mr Weir: Earlier in his speech, the Secretary of State referred to the disgraceful decision of the previous Government to abandon the gas CCS project at Peterhead, but are not this Government doing exactly the same with Longannet now? It was chosen as the only viable CCS plant in the competition, as no one else came forward. By abandoning it now, is he not putting back CCS development and ensuring that its much talked about exportable technology will not be developed in this country?

Chris Huhne: No, I disagree with that. I think that we have a very good track record at a number of our leading universities, with Edinburgh being first and foremost amongst them, of work on carbon capture and storage. One lesson that we have learned from the negotiations is that we can build a commercial-scale CCS plant with £1 billion. Indeed, we have had a very clear indication of interest back at Peterhead from Scottish and Southern that it would be prepared to do that with consortium partners. That is clearly going to be an offer that other contestants will have to beat, so for all the reasons that I have given and that I have explained at considerable length, we are determined that we should be successful with CCS technology. It is disappointing to me personally and to many others that we were not able to proceed at Longannet because of the specific problems there, but that certainly does not mean that we are shelving CCS.

Andrew George: I appreciate that my right hon. Friend is giving the House the benefit of time and his advice on the issue. Nevertheless, there will be concern about the impact that that outcome might have on the time scale for the delivery of an effective CCS programme. To be clear, is he saying that the difficulties at Longannet were primarily financial or technical? Does that raise a question about the viability of the technology, or can he reassure the House in that regard?

Chris Huhne: I can reassure the House that on the basis of the feed studies, that does not raise questions about the generic technology. What arose were questions related to the specific costs of employing the technology at Longannet, given how far away it is from the reservoirs and so forth. Those were the issues. We are confident that we can procure a CCS commercial scale plant within that £1 billion. That is what we intend to do.

Ian Lavery: A billion pounds was allocated to the CCS project at Longannet. I am amazed by what was said at Prime Minister's Question Time and by what the Secretary of State has just said. That it is not going to happen. Projects 2 to 4 were already in the pipeline—excuse the pun—and I believe there are a number of interested parties. Will the £1 billion allocated for Longannet be available for one of those projects or will it be available across the board? Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that it will be committed to CCS with coal, or could it be gas?

Chris Huhne: Let me say clearly that one of the things we will do is attempt to align our deadlines on this with the European Commission's new entrant reserve competition. One of the conditions of that competition is that the CCS plants have to be up and running and ready by 2016. That is in answer to the earlier question about the deadline. We do not foresee a slippage in deadlines.

There is money available from the European budget to support those projects. Money will be available. That £1 billion from the UK Treasury is secure. In addition, there may be help for running costs from the electricity market reform contracts for difference. With all those things we ought to be able to make sure that we get commercial-scale carbon capture and storage up and running. The projects that have been proposed to the Commission are a mixture of coal and gas. We want to make sure that we are doing both.

I hope the House will come away knowing that we are fully committed to the programme and the technology. What happened at Longannet is a disappointment. We would have liked it to go ahead if we could have done it within the affordability envelope that we had and if we had not hit those specific project problems there, but we will now go ahead elsewhere and we are confident that we will be able to get the commercial-scale CCS.

Our proposals to reform the electricity market—I have already mentioned contracts for difference—will deliver the best deal for Britain and for consumers because they will keep prices down and ensure that consumers are protected. We are working on giving Ofgem powers to force companies to give money back to consumers if the companies break the rules. That is the point about redress that the right hon. Lady mentioned.

Caroline Flint: Will that include customers who have already been victims of mis-selling or is the policy only for those who might be misled in the future?

Chris Huhne: The right hon. Lady knows that unfortunately it is a strong principle right across the House, and I am sure she will agree, that we should not have retrospective legislation. Legislation is for matters going forward. I agree that it would have been good if we had had legislation allowing for redress some years ago, but we have been in government only since the last election. For 13 years that was not done by the Labour Government.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Did the Secretary of State raise the issue of mis-selling at the energy summit? It seems to me that he probably was not there long enough to do so.

Chris Huhne: The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong about that. Mis-selling is clear. Ofgem had already tackled that with substantial fines and with the public reputational risk. As a result of the mis-selling that some of the companies were discovered to have engaged in, a number of them have said that they will not go down the doorstep route. There is therefore clear action on that already, but I agree that what should happen is not just a question of fines or making sure that the companies get the rap—*[Interruption.]* I have raised the matter with the companies and with Ofgem. It is important to make sure that there is also the possibility for Ofgem to provide redress to consumers who have lost out. That is an important principle. All of us on the Government Benches will want companies to rise to their responsibilities.

We are also working to open up the energy market to smaller companies. In the past, regulation stopped independent suppliers serving more than 50,000 customers. We have already raised the ceiling to 250,000 customers, and we are working with small suppliers to make it easier for them to comply with regulation.

Global energy prices are beyond our control, but we are doing everything we can to help households with their energy bills this winter. On tariffs, bills and insulation, we are making it easier for people to save money and save energy. Together with consumer groups and industry, we are working to improve the offer to consumers. We are taking action to help the most vulnerable households to cope with rising bills and inefficient properties. From the green deal to the reform of the electricity market, we are making the right long-term decisions to ensure warm homes and affordable, secure energy for the future.

Caroline Flint: At Prime Minister's Question Time today the Prime Minister suggested that he supported the opening up of the energy market to a pool. Does that mean that the Government agree with the Labour Front-Bench team that the pool should be opened up in such a way that the big six should put all their energy into a pool for everybody to compete for?

Chris Huhne: I certainly agree. We have been talking to Ofgem about this and we have been talking with the big six. I found it a very interesting proposal from Scottish and Southern that it was prepared to trade a substantial amount of its electricity in the wholesale market. Scottish and Southern said 100%—of course, that is 100% of the spot market; it does not mean that Scottish and Southern is prepared to trade 100% of its electricity. The devil is in the detail. We have to make sure that the forward market is also liquid.

I am absolutely committed. I am not in favour of the Opposition's proposal that we should refer these matters to the Competition Commission, because for two to five years that would put a freeze on the whole market. None of the big six would need to do anything at all. They would be able to put their prices up with impunity, they would be able to cut their investment, they would be able to pay more dividends to shareholders, and we would have an awful long time to wait before we had any real reform. The reality is that we think that we understand enough about what is not right in the market, at the retail end and the wholesale end, and are working very hard with Ofgem to ensure that it is put right, which is exactly what we will do.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Huhne: I am afraid that I have finished my speech, as delighted as I would have been to give way to my neighbour from Southampton.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I must now announce the result of the deferred Division on the question relating to the Adjournment of the House. The Ayes were 306 and the Noes were 95, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

Before calling the next speaker, I inform Members that there is a 12-minute limit on speeches.

3.28 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Secretary of State. I had intended to be non-partisan and speak in favour of consensus, but having listened to his opening remarks, I will find it difficult to be disciplined and keep to that line, because he rewrote the recent history of energy. I certainly take no lectures from him on nuclear power and many other things. I have stood on the Government side of the House and argued in favour of nuclear power, the base load, renewables and energy efficiency, and I see no contradiction between them. For him to try to knock the policy of the Labour party when it was in government is nothing short of cheek.

I welcome the debate because energy prices are the big issue for constituents and consumers across the country. I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) chose this topic for her first outing as shadow Secretary of State. She gave an excellent overview of what has happened in recent weeks.

I did not want to be partisan, because the issue is too important for that, but when people criticise what happened in the past 13 years, I must remind them that, since 2009, there has been a trend of high gas and electricity price rises. The rise in 2008-09 was seen as a one-off resulting from a peak oil situation. In 2009-10 prices came down considerably. In 2009, gas prices rose by 51% in a single year and electricity prices also rose considerably, but the following year, when the wholesale price was half what it had been at its peak, prices came down by only 6% and 9% respectively. We have seen since then a trend of double-digit rises that are hurting every household in the country. That is why the House is right to debate the matter and look for ways to help.

I am very disappointed with the summit. I tabled a question last Friday, without knowing that there was to be a summit, asking when the Secretary of State last met the big six energy companies. He has partly answered that question, but I am disappointed that he did not ask them whether they would freeze their prices in future and what they would do to bring them down. The duty of the Secretary of State is to put the consumer's view to those companies.

Our constituents are right to be annoyed by the fact that those companies' profits have increased in the past few months from £15 to £125 for each household. I want to make it clear that I am not against energy companies making profits or having healthy balance sheets, because we need them to reinvest in our infrastructure as we move to a low-carbon economy, but I find it very upsetting that they claim that the wholesale price is high and put their prices up, but when the wholesale price comes down, the retail price does not follow suit. Our constituents are paying for that very dearly. As my right hon. friend said, that is the rocket-and-feathers concept—prices rocket after the wholesale price increases, but they come down very slowly.

Jonathan Edwards: As a proud Welshman, like myself, is the hon. Gentleman not perplexed that Wales, despite being a net exporter of electricity—we export twice what we consume—has a level of household energy poverty at 30%?

Albert Owen: I am a fellow Welshman, but my energy policy is different from that of the hon. Gentleman. Wales is a net exporter of energy because Wylfa nuclear power station, which is in my constituency, generates 30% of Wales's energy needs. If that was to go, we would be in a difficult situation. However, he is right to point out that some regions of the United Kingdom that generate energy pay more in the retail price for their energy. The energy companies will tell us—I have raised this as a member of the Energy and Climate Change Committee—that that is because of transmission, but those areas, which are often on the periphery of the UK, generate electricity and send it to the national grid, but the consumers in those areas pay more for it. That is totally wrong and something we all need to work together to eliminate in future.

I wish to concentrate on two issues. The first is the reform of the regulator. I would like the regulator to have more teeth. That is not just my view. I can remember the Prime Minister, when Leader of the Opposition, saying that the regulator needs to get to grips with the energy companies and ensure that they deal with price rises. I agreed with him then, and I agree with that statement now. That is also why I am disappointed that there was a high-profile energy summit in No. 10 that resulted in these very tame reforms, if indeed they are to come about.

Ofgem has already suggested that we introduce greater accountability, greater transparency and simpler tariffs, and the Secretary of State was wrong about the time scale, because I believe that in the past year the number of tariffs has gone up considerably from 180 to some 400. I am not making a political point, because I know that many people, such as the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) of whom I am very fond, have phoned up energy company call centres and tried to switch tariffs but found it extremely difficult to do so. They have spoken to people at call centres who, despite representing and working for the companies, do not themselves know the tariffs, so the system really needs to be simplified to ensure that people understand them and can make a choice.

Even if everyone were to switch to a cheaper tariff tomorrow, they would still in a year or two's time be paying more for their energy, so switching is a peripheral issue. We want the energy companies to divvy out some of their profits to help customers directly or to build infrastructure for the future—*[Interruption.]* Somebody shouts, "They are," but they are not using their profits to a considerable degree.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con) *rose*—

Albert Owen: The hon. Lady is trying to intervene. Would she like to intervene on that point?

Dr Coffey: Yes, I would. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is a little sore because his island is not going to get a new nuclear power station.

Albert Owen: It is.

Dr Coffey: Well, I apologise, but who does the hon. Gentleman think is going to pay for it? It will be the energy companies. They are paying towards the construction of new nuclear power stations.

Albert Owen: I am sorry if the hon. Lady was not listening, but I believe that we will have a new nuclear power station; the consortium, Horizon, is working towards that. Issues in Germany might affect its balance sheet, but it is committed, as the Labour Government were, to the project. Work is being carried out, and I support the site that has been allocated.

When huge profits are made, the customer should not be punished, as they have been, with high rises in their gas and electricity bills. If the hon. Lady thinks the opposite, she is in a minority in the House, because we have seen excessive profits.

Dr Coffey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Albert Owen: No, I am not going to give way again. I was talking about excessive profits, but I am going to develop an argument about the off-grid, which nobody has touched on so far.

When we talk about energy prices, and about double-digit rises for people with the big six energy companies and for the 99% of retailers who are on-grid, we should also consider those who are off-grid. They are not a small minority, because a considerable number of households are not connected to the grid and have experienced—I have seen evidence from constituents—increases of about 33% in the price of liquefied petroleum gas. The cost of oil has also gone up considerably, so I welcome the fact that the Office of Fair Trading is looking into the matter, but it will not be enough just to refer it to the Competition Commission; there needs to be direct action.

I should like a windfall tax. I am not afraid to use that phrase, and neither is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who in his Budget introduced a fuel duty—a windfall tax—to help people who were suffering then. The Government should do exactly the same for domestic energy users and households. The excess profits of energy companies should be used to help build an infrastructure, for example by extending gas mains, so that people off-grid have the opportunity—the choice—to go on to mains-supplied gas and obtain the same prices as those who are on-grid.

Indeed, we should go further. I would link off-grid issues to reform of the regulator, because the regulator should have responsibility for those who are off-grid as well as for those who are on-grid. The priority of the regulator, in its terms of reference, is to protect the consumer, yet those who are off-grid receive less protection, so I am asking for the equalisation of protection.

The Secretary of State will remember that I asked him about that when he appeared before the Energy and Climate Change Committee, and I asked the head of Ofgem, too. The head of Ofgem said, "That's a matter for the Government", and the Secretary of State said, "It's a matter for the regulator." Well, I should like to invite both of them for afternoon tea and to sit them down in a room, because people off-grid are losing out considerably while the Secretary of State and the head of Ofgem have different opinions of their remit.

The solution is simple and it could be implemented very quickly. The Government could give powers to the regulator, and the people off-grid could have protection equal to that for those who are on-grid. The 33% increase that I heard about from a constituent happened in summertime—in August—and it is not sustainable in the rural areas that are not isolated and that contain decent-sized hamlets, small villages and sometimes even small towns.

We need to be radical in our reform. Of course I agree with the Secretary of State and the regulator when they talk about simplifying bills and about greater transparency by the energy companies, but we have to go a step further and give the regulator real teeth so that it can deal with these situations. That is important to every Member of this House and every constituent we represent. We should never forget that those who are off-grid are paying considerably more than those who are with the big six.

I support many of the measures that are being proposed by the Government for electricity market reform, but they are all about the medium and the long term and, in

[Albert Owen]

the short term, people are being really hurt by their bills when they receive them. We, as the House of Commons, the Government and the regulator need to be working together for the short term. I would like to believe that the measures that came out of the summit will make a huge difference to our constituents, but that will not happen in the short term. The House of Commons—I very much welcome this debate—must fix its mind on the short term to help each and every household in the United Kingdom with their energy bills in future. Yes, there will be peaks and troughs with the prices of fuels and external issues that affect the price of energy—we all understand that—but we need to have a fair system so that when prices do come down the regulator can look at the books and say, "Yes, prices for consumers should come down by X amount as well." Ofgem tried to do this and produced a report, but the energy companies argued with that process.

This is not anti-business or anti the big six; it is pro-consumer and pro our constituents. We all have a duty to stand up and protect their interests. The regulator needs to be beefed up, it needs to have more teeth, and it needs to be more proactive—but so do the Government. It is important to have this debate not to score political points but to put the welfare of our constituents first. They will be anxious this winter given their experience of such cold weather in the past year, and they want certainty that the House of Commons is on their side.

3.42 pm

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): I genuinely believe that this winter there will be choices between heating and eating for individual families up and down the country. The fuel poverty rate in the north-east is approximately 24%; we have the second highest rate in the country. Clearly, that applies in relation to the big six, but I particularly want to speak about it in relation to heating oil and liquefied petroleum gas. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). Over the past year, he and I have debated, very much with common cause, the issues of fuel poverty and heating oil, and I am delighted to follow his eloquent and well-made speech.

My constituency is the second biggest constituency in the country, at 1,150 square miles, and it does not just face problems of rural fuel poverty. The town of West Wylam, which is a suburban part of Prudhoe, is in an area that has fundamental problems of fuel poverty, and it has perfectly normal residential housing: this is not just about a farm way out west. It is not simply a problem for rural dwellings. One and a half million dwellings are dependent on heating oil. On top of that, significant amounts of LPG are used. We are talking not about a small number of people but a very significant number who are greatly affected by this, which is an important problem throughout the north-east.

I will focus on the role of the Office of Fair Trading, which I believe has done good work. Its report of September this year on Boilerjuice was a success. The report published only yesterday on off-grid energy, about which I met the OFT at approximately 12 o'clock today, is well worth reading. It is a doughty read at 352 pages, and it would be a lie if I said that I had read every single page, but I am working my way through, and none of my copy will go for fuel at the end of the day.

The OFT's investigation into off-grid energy is a market study. Those who analyse what the OFT does need to understand that a market study does not necessarily lead to a formal investigation. As a first point I invite the ministerial team to consider that, although clearly it is not fundamentally within their remit.

Karl Turner: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech on behalf of his constituents. I wonder whether he will support the Opposition motion.

Guy Opperman: The hon. Gentleman obviously did not hear what the ministerial team said earlier, which addressed that exact point.

The OFT report is a market study, but I seek a formal investigation where there is a reasonable suspicion that the law has been breached in relation to the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. I suggest that that applies to pricing practices, particularly when there is a varying price after a customer has placed an order. In my constituency, there is ample evidence that that has happened.

Sarah Newton: I apologise that I was not here for the first part of my hon. Friend's speech, but an urgent matter called me out of the Chamber. The experience that he so vividly describes in his constituency is echoed in Cornwall and across the south-west. I, too, welcome yesterday's OFT report. It says specifically that there is an opportunity for us to go back to the OFT and make the case for a referral to the Competition Commission to look further at the issue of pricing, which he has raised. Will he join me in suggesting that Members whose constituents are affected by this should join together to make representations to the OFT for such a referral?

Guy Opperman: I totally endorse that point, particularly in relation to pricing practices and the considerably enhanced prices charged by many heating oil suppliers. I have done quite a lot of research into this matter. In Hexham constituency the price of oil rose from 41p to 71p per litre between September and December last year. In that time, the wholesale price of oil went up only by about 10%.

In my constituency there are roughly 16 to 18 heating oil providers. However, 11 or 12 of those are controlled by one company. DCC Energy, an Irish-based company, has bought up many of the individual suppliers throughout the country. It operates heavily in west Wales and has been prosecuted there in relation to a trading standards case. It also operates to a considerable extent in Scotland. In Northumberland and throughout the north-east it has a substantial presence. I accept that there is competition in the sense that there are about five genuinely independent companies providing heating oil. However, the other dozen or so are providing heating oil from one global source. There is nothing wrong with that, but when one adds up the figures, it means that one company has 69% of the providers and the multitude of other companies represent 31% of the providers. That should be investigated by the OFT, and it should result in a competition inquiry. If that case does not give the suspicion of price fixing, I do not know what does.

Andrew George: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on that point. Across the country as a whole, a little under 30% of those who depend on oil for central heating are in fuel poverty, and they are primarily in rural areas.

With regard to the OFT's report published yesterday, does the hon. Gentleman recognise that it found that the terms of contracts may not be entirely consistent with existing consumer protection? The OFT states that it will examine the

> "clarity and fairness of termination rights"

and engage with suppliers to discuss how to proceed. Does he think that regulation is required, or should the OFT continue to pursue some sort of voluntary agreement ?

Guy Opperman: With respect, I would say that the answer is somewhere in between. There cannot be regulation without submissions being made and investigations taking place. It is incumbent upon us not just to get upset about how our constituents are being affected by heating oil prices but to make representations to organisations such as the OFT. We must also invite the Energy and Climate Change Committee to investigate off-grid energy, which I very much hope it will do.

Albert Owen: I am pleased to help the hon. Gentleman by saying that we are going to have a further inquiry into the retail market, in which we will examine off-grid energy.

Guy Opperman: I am most grateful, and I hope that as part of that inquiry the Committee will examine the weighty report that the OFT has provided, as well as specific submissions from individuals and organisations that, like the previous three speakers, can give specific examples of price fixing or the appearance of price fixing. That is in the context of DCC, the company that I am particularly concerned about and have to deal with, recording operating profits of approximately 19.9% on an ongoing basis. I find that figure hard to square with the one given by the managing director, who when questioned in *The Sunday Times* said that the operating profit was only 2%—but I have taken my figure from the published accounts.

In Hexham five independents operate—WCF, Par Petroleum, Wallace Oils, GB Fuels Ltd and Rix Petroleum. I urge individual Members to draw to their constituents' attention by every possible means, as I do for each and every constituent who is faced by heating oil problems, which independents operate in the constituency, so that they are in a better position to get a fair price.

I want to trumpet the great success of the way in which certain communities, such as Tarset, Allendale and Humshaugh, have come together and produced their own price comparison sites. For example, there is Humshaugh village shop, which is run as a co-operative. It was set up by the local community and is financed and run by the 60 people of Humshaugh. Every Monday they publish the prices available from all the genuinely independent local heating oil suppliers. Individuals can either go to the shop's website or—this addresses the point that was raised about people who do not have internet access—see the prices in the village shop throughout the week. Everybody in the village can then assess who is providing oil locally. Such ideas need to be taken forward.

I welcome the fact that the OFT report indicates that there are problems. However, I would ask the OFT to go further, not least because the report shows that when a company is one of a multitude owned by a larger company, it is obliged to give people who telephone it specific information about who its ultimate owner is. That needs to be monitored, because it is not necessarily taking place. My researcher phoned one of those only yesterday and was not given that information, as should have happened according to the OFT report. I urge the various Committees involved to examine that point.

There is also tremendous difficulty for those who wish to compare prices themselves, because heating companies have no obligation to tell people the price that they are offering. Unless people ask to buy, they are not necessarily given the price. With respect, the Government can do something about that, and I invite them to sit down with individual suppliers, particularly the larger suppliers, and make that point very clear to them. If people ring up and ask for a price, they should be told it rather than the company withholding it.

Pat Glass: I am very grateful to my constituency neighbour for giving way, as we have very similar constituencies and face similar issues. Is it not also true that the price quoted when someone rings up is not necessarily the price that they are charged when the oil is delivered two weeks later? Last winter, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the cost of heating oil almost doubled in the space of a few weeks. Someone could order heating oil and be quoted 40p a litre, yet get a bill for 71p a litre two weeks later.

Guy Opperman: The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) is not the only one who has been carrying out research on websites. Let me cite the interesting efforts to prove the hon. Lady's exact point undertaken by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Roger Williams), who ordered more than 2,000 litres of heating oil at a price of 40p a litre—again, from DCC—and received only some of the delivery, at the outset, at that price. Later that December, when the remainder was delivered, the price was 65p per litre—an increase of 25p per litre. I applaud his efforts in this House to publicise that, and previous efforts to deal with the problem, as well as the work of *The Sunday Times*.

I conclude by saying that I endorse much of the motion.

Sarah Newton: One of the next steps identified by the OFT was for the Government to take, because it acknowledged that people who use heating oil or LPG—or microgeneration, which the report also covers—cannot get dual fuel deals because they are off the grid, and furthermore, they are not eligible for the excellent new £125 warm home discount. This group of people, even if they are in absolute fuel poverty, cannot access some of the very good measures that the Government are introducing. May we ask the Government to consider that specific group of people, and see what could be done to help them?

Guy Opperman: I am most grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention, and I endorse her point.

It is incumbent on us all to go back to our constituencies—not, as was once said, to prepare for government, but to prepare our constituents for the winter.

3.57 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who pointed out some important flaws in a market that should be fully competitive but at present does not best serve consumers.

People will be pleased to hear the Secretary of State backing the Labour motion but greatly disappointed that he has little to say that will give them any comfort or relief from the high and rising pressure of energy bills.

I want to talk about and draw some conclusions from the experience of a constituent who came to see me: Mr Terry Tomes of Denman road in Wath upon Dearne. Mr Tomes is on disability living allowance. He had a prepayment meter to try to control the costs of his energy bills, but he found himself with a debt to npower for gas and electricity of nearly £100. He was in such desperation about that that despite it being mid-winter, he had stopped using the gas entirely. I draw two conclusions from Mr Tomes's experience: first, this is a system that requires much clearer and fairer pricing and regulation for consumers; and, secondly, the regulator, the energy companies and, above all, the Government are failing consumers across the country.

They are failing consumers in three ways. First, they are out of touch. People simply cannot believe their ears when they hear the Secretary of State say in answer to the question of high energy prices that consumers are to blame for not shopping around. If people are not online, if they are on prepayment meters, if they do not have full bank accounts, and if they are unfortunate enough to call, according to the recent Which? survey, the one in three energy company advisers who do not give accurate information about their charges, they are simply not able to shop around as the Secretary of State suggests. Even the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) is not able to do so, as in June he told the Energy and Climate Change Committee:

> "I went on line to compare my tariffs and I was so confused by the options that I decided to stick where I was".

The Government are out of touch—that is the first way in which they are failing consumers.

Ian Lavery: To put a bit of humility into the debate and to cut across party politics, the fact of the matter is that fuel poverty is on the increase. Last year, 36,700 pensioners died because of cold-related problems. That is 13 per hour. Does not that fly in the face of the austerity measures? Older people cannot access the right tariffs and they cannot pay their bills. How are they expected to pay their bills? How are they expected to look at different tariffs and access all the information that Government Members have talked about? Is it not right that we focus on those people as a matter of urgency to try to reduce the number of elderly pensioners who die because of fuel poverty?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right when he says that, for many, high energy prices mean a choice between eating and heating, and, in some cases, a choice between life and death, particularly in a harsh winter.

The second way in which the Government are failing is that they are scrapping some of the important Labour schemes to make homes warmer and bills lower, particularly the Warm Front scheme. You will know as well as I do from your experience in the Treasury, Madam Deputy Speaker, that over a decade, the Warm Front scheme helped more than 2 million households with their bills and insulation—it helped to make their homes greener, warmer and cheaper to run. This year and next year, that scheme will have a third of the budget that it had under the previous Labour Government. From 2013, it will be scrapped altogether.

In my constituency of Wentworth and Dearne, more than 3,000 households have benefited from that scheme in recent years, including pensioners, disabled people and young working families. One of my most recent visits was to Nicola Savage and her partner, Dan, who have two young kids. They had problems heating their home in Swinton, but the Warm Front scheme helped to replace an old back boiler with a new condensing unit. As Nicola told me at the time, "This makes a huge difference to us. When you switch it on, the house gets warm quickly and it stays warm."

Andrew George: I believe that the previous Government were well intentioned with regard to the Warm Front scheme, but when I visited my constituents who benefited from it—there is no question that they benefited—I found that most of them paid twice as much as they should have done. I do not know who pocketed the benefit of that system, but my constituents could have paid half the price to a local supplier. The scheme was certainly not fit for purpose.

John Healey: I do not know whether there is anything peculiar about the contractors and suppliers in St Ives, but that is not the general experience or track record of the scheme throughout the country, and it is not the experience of most hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Sarah Newton: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Healey: I will not give way for the moment.

The third way in which the Government are failing is that they are letting consumers down by allowing the huge hike in energy costs and bills, which are up 20% in the past year, as we have heard. In six months, there has been an increase of £175. The Secretary of State, who knows the cost of speeding, is not in the Chamber at the moment, but for his benefit, £175 is the price of about three speeding tickets. Every time a family in this country switches on the heating or the lights, the Government are letting them down—and those with the lowest incomes and the poorest households are being let down the most.

Mr Tomes, who could afford £10 a week on his gas, found that he was paying £3 a week just for the gas debt charge, which was taken directly through the meter. The average cost for using the gas each week was £2.30, but the standing charge was £3.31. In other words, he was paying more for his standing charge than for the gas that he used. Why is the system penalising the poorest and benefiting the better-off? Why is it failing those whose consumer power is weakest while reinforcing the market position and choices of those who have money and confidence and can get online? In particular, why is it penalising low users of energy while rewarding higher users? Why are low users, such as Mr Tomes, paying more and losing out more?

The answer is that all the major energy companies have a two-charge system. They justify it by saying that one charge covers the fixed costs of supply while the other covers the variable costs. That means that every major energy company either has a standing charge plus a unit rate or a higher-tier tariff up to a certain threshold and then a lower-tier second tariff beyond that. As a result, the less energy used, the greater the part of the bill that goes to the standing charge, fixed part or higher-tariff component of the costs, which means that low-use households pay more for each unit of energy that they use. Which? has calculated that low-use households pay 23% more for their gas and 15% more for their electricity, and of course low-use households generally tend to be low-income households as well. The system is therefore socially and environmentally regressive. Its reform is well overdue, and it is time for the Government and the regulator to act.

The action needed is clear: we should require energy suppliers to recover a far greater proportion of their costs from the unit rate of energy. To make energy bills clearer and fairer, I propose to the Minister a five-point plan—[Hon. Members: "Hooray!"] They are in vogue at the moment. First, we should abolish variable tariffs for the same energy supply. Secondly, we should require all tariffs to have the same format—a daily standing charge plus a clear cost per unit, including all the discounts. Thirdly, we should restrict standing charges only to cover the costs of the gas and electricity network. Fourthly, we should cover all other costs, including the costs of the Government's climate change or social policies, through the variable charge, not on a per-customer basis, as is currently the case. Fifthly, to make these changes, we should use Ofgem's current powers to regulate standing charges, under licensed conditions, plus the energy company obligation.

Those changes would make the system clearer, making it easier for people to compare suppliers' prices at a glance, and also fairer, so that low-income, low-use households would not have to pay significantly higher prices for the energy that they need. Those changes would be right in practice and right in principle, because climate change and social equity policies are best and most effective when they are more specific and selective in their application rather than having a general application. The costs of climate change should bite more strongly on heavy users, while the cost of supporting poor households should be borne more heavily by higher-using households that earn higher incomes.

Ultimately, people do not have the choice not to consume energy. As a service in a full-scale market, energy is a special case. That places a special responsibility on the Government to do more to protect consumers, who must have the energy that we all depend on.

4.11 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who made a powerful case on behalf of his constituents and made some valuable points.

This is an important debate, because as I know from talking to my constituents in the west midlands, people are genuinely concerned about rising utility bills. As other hon. Members have pointed out, including the Secretary of State, fuel poverty urgently needs to be addressed. The west midlands as a region has the greatest proportion of people in fuel poverty in England, at 22.5% of the population or some 500,000 people. Around 20% of my constituents—7,500 people—could be defined as being in fuel poverty. This issue therefore needs to be tackled urgently. It has been around for a while: it has not suddenly emerged in the last 18 months, although I accept that genuine spikes in fuel prices have made the situation more difficult.

The Government need to respond—and they are responding—with a mix of policies. Both short-term and long-term policies need to be deployed to tackle the entrenched problem of fuel poverty and the situation that we face. However, there is no silver bullet, as it were, that could be fired to solve some of the difficult problems that we face from rising fuel prices. I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House have made some valid points; I am bucking the fashion by not having a five-point plan—because a number of the issues are interlinked. We live in a society where our houses lose energy very rapidly—something about our housing stock is weak in that regard—which is why I am supportive of the Government's initiatives in the green deal, which I believe offers a comprehensive solution to improving energy efficiency. The green deal will also have the side benefit of potentially providing important jobs in the area of the black country that I represent. I know, having talked to many local organisations and people in the Rowley Regis area, that there is particular enthusiasm for the green deal. We need to tackle energy loss in our housing stock.

I also welcome other initiatives that came out of the summit that was held earlier in the week. The big six energy companies have a responsibility to communicate information to their customers in a much more targeted way, so I welcome the announcement that they are to write to the 4 million most vulnerable energy consumers about the opportunities that are available for home insulation. That strikes me as a fundamental responsibility, and the big six need to concentrate on the way in which they communicate basic information to some of the most vulnerable in our communities.

Just as we need to tackle the problem of energy loss in our housing stock, we also need to focus on unnecessary energy use. This is not about going around lecturing people on how they should heat their homes, but I know that the Government are committed to introducing smart meters, which will make a fundamental difference. This is a long-term project, but, as I have said, we need short-term and long-term measures to address these questions. Smart meters will introduce a major change in the way in which people consume energy, and they will certainly help them to have a clearer idea of their family or individual energy use.

The Secretary of State and others have also raised the broader strategic point that we face major issues of energy security in Britain today. The fact has been well documented that Britain is very vulnerable to energy price shocks, and our dependency on imported gas and oil has given rise to energy security issues. This is a macro question, and it is imperative that we diversify our energy sources. Hon. Members have talked about the use of nuclear power, as well as other forms of low-carbon energy and renewables, over the next 10 to 20 years. This is critical; we are not going to solve the problems affecting our most vulnerable residents and might go some way towards allaying fears if that could be spelled out directly. Likewise, there is relatively minimal guidance in the draft framework on the right to refuse development to mitigate flood risk, which is an important factor in my constituency. Perhaps that, too, might be spelled out a little more clearly.

I am confident that we can get the balance right in the framework. It is important, and the overarching aim behind it is sound. I am even more confident that Ministers will take due account of the points expressed by colleagues during the debate, and by the experts and other groups outside the House, so that we end up with a framework that both cuts bureaucracy and strengthens localism.

Mark Pawsey *rose—*

Bob Russell *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. The wind-ups are due to begin at 5.30 pm, so we have time for a very short contribution from Mr Mark Pawsey.

5.26 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I say at the outset that it is important not to underestimate the importance of this afternoon's debate, because we are talking about the development of land, and once land is developed it remains developed. There is no going back. When development takes the form of a building, the average life of a structure is 60 years, so it is very important that we get these things right.

What are the reasons for changing the system? I believe there are three. The first is the lack of public participation in the planning process. Local communities often feel that they have no power in the face of the development industry and are unable to influence what happens. They have things done to them, not by them. The second is the housing failures that we have heard about, with last year seeing the lowest number of peacetime house building completions since 1923. The third is the failed system of 1,000-plus pages of guidance.

It is interesting that the simplifications have been welcomed not only by the shadow Secretary of State but by the opponents of the Government's proposals. The Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), drew attention to the evidence that we heard from Simon Jenkins of the National Trust, who said that

> "everyone agrees the planning system needs localising and needs updating."

I believe there are four positive reasons for accepting the framework with enthusiasm. The first is that it embraces localism and involves local people. It is only right that local people should have a leading role. The second is that it places the views of the broader community above those of narrow groups. For example, paragraph 167 states that authorities should

> "give great weight to protecting landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks".

Regrettably, there will always be those who oppose any kind of development, but I believe the Government have been courageous in dealing with that problem. Professor Sir Peter Hall, whose lectures I attended in the '70s, has praised the Prime Minister for

> "defying the extraordinary narrow lobby"

presented by those who support nimbyism.

The third reason for accepting the framework is that it will protect the environment. That view is supported by the Countryside Land and Business Association. The fourth is the economic argument that it will provide a system to get our economy moving.

I wish to mention the "town centre first" policy. I have great sympathy with those who argue in favour of retaining office use within that policy, because offices provide the consumers who support the retail and hospitality sectors, which we are defending in the framework.

In conclusion, the economy is stagnant, yet prime land for development lies untouched because in recent years our planning framework simply has not worked. Our reforms represent a fundamental step change in community power and provide a much better system for economic development. The Government should not be swayed off course by the lobby that has rallied against them in recent months.

5.30 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): This debate has been wide ranging and informed, with many memorable contributions, and has been conducted in a constructive and cross-party way, focusing on what the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) called a matter of crucial concern to our communities and our country: the future of the planning system. Indeed, such was the nature of the 60 hours of debate that we had on the Localism Bill that the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), listened with an open mind to strong criticism of the Government's fundamental changes to our planning system of 60 years standing. He listened to the concerns that we expressed and to a coalition of the concerned from the business community, through to the planners and those charged with safeguarding our countryside and heritage. A decent man, the philosopher king of localism—he agreed that big changes to the Government's proposals were necessary.

Imagine, therefore, how the Minister must have felt, Mr Speaker, having on the Saturday offered constructive dialogue with the National Trust, the Campaign to Protect Rural England and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, when he woke up on the Monday to read a declaration of war in the *Financial Times*—a declaration announced by the formidable presence of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the omnipresent Chancellor of the Exchequer. "This is a battle we must win," they declared. "We will fight them on the hillside, in the dales and on the beaches." The propaganda machine then went into full throttle. The National Trust, a charity of more than 4 million members and with more than 60,000 volunteers—the quintessence of the good society—was accused of running a left-wing smear campaign to justify its own existence, supported by what Ministers now believe to be the *Pravda* of the British press, *The Daily Telegraph*. We are talking about a charity that has more than 100 million visits to its properties every year—including, I understand, one only last year by the Bullingdon club, although I am not sure whether that was to admire our heritage or to smash it up.

On the criticisms of the planning system, the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) made the point in her characteristically honest way that, in her words, the system achieved much over

[Jack Dromey]

the last 50 years. In the light of some of the contributions that have been made, it is important briefly to put the record right. The Government have said that the planning system is broken and that there are too many refusals. Wrong: the Government's own figures show that 86% of applications were approved by district planning authorities last year. The Government have told us that the planning system does not deliver enough permissions to meet housing need. Wrong: in 2006 and 2007, before the financial crash, Labour's planning system delivered more than 500,000 permissions for new homes, tens of thousands above the 60,000 now needed each quarter to meet our housing need. The Government have also said that the planning system is a huge barrier to growth. "It's far too slow," they say. Wrong: last year, 81% of developments for districts were dealt with within eight weeks, rising to 92% within 13 weeks.

In need of improvement? Absolutely, and it was common ground in the debate on the Localism Bill that the planning system was capable of improvement. A broken planning system? Absolutely not. A planning system that is responsible, as some in the Government have alleged, for near-zero growth and a collapse in house building? Utter nonsense.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) was right to say that it was this Government who were responsible for residential planning permissions falling to 25,000—the second lowest number of permissions granted in a quarter in the past five years—and causing chaos in the planning system. And it is this Government who are responsible for a mortgage market in which no one can get a mortgage. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) were both right to say that that was having a serious impact on development and developers because, although planning permission exists to build 300,000 homes, the mortgage finance—and the finance more generally—just is not available.

The Government have ripped up a 60-year-old system that delivered in the public interest, striking the balance between growth and development, on the one hand, and the protection of our natural environment and a real say for local people, on the other. Emerging from the ashes of the war, the great planning settlement of 1947 sought to reconcile growth and development with a genuine say for local people and the protection of our natural environment. Now, in the 21st century, in these desperate economic times, we need growth and development. My constituency of Erdington might be rich in talent, but it is one of the 12 poorest in Britain. I represent a constituency that badly wants to see growth and development. However, the reformed planning system must be built on those same fundamental principles, and it must work.

Today, in the light of this first-class debate, we want to say to the Government that fundamental changes are necessary. The Government must put in place a workable presumption in favour of genuine sustainable development that will give confidence that our countryside and environment will be protected. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole was right to ask why we should not continue to use the 2005 definition. The Government must restore Labour's successful "brownfield first" policy. The hon. Member for Winchester (Mr Brine) was right when he said that the existing definition was clear and that it should continue to obtain in the future.

Mr Marcus Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Dromey: Given the time available, I will not.

The "brownfield first" policy was working. Last year, 76% of new dwellings were built on brownfield sites, up from 55% in 1989. There are currently enough brownfield sites on which to build 1.2 million homes. The Government must put the heart back into our high streets by protecting, not weakening, the "town centre first" policy, and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) was right to ask the Government to do precisely that. They must not weaken the requirement to provide affordable housing, which is fundamental to meeting a growing housing crisis and ensuring the future prosperity of our young people. They should accept Labour's proposed transitional arrangements to ensure certainty for local people, communities and developers alike. The hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) was right to say that, during the transition, local communities should be protected from predatory bids.

As the excellent contribution from the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), made clear, the Government must recognise that their duty to co-operate, as it stands, is toothless and will not allow for the kind of effective strategic planning that England needs in order to deliver on our future needs in housing, economic development, waste management, transport, infrastructure and the mitigation of climate change. We must not have a planning system that is increasingly combative, rather than consensual, with applications being decided in the courts as the number of appeals goes through the roof. In the chaos that is unfolding in our planning system, more homes there will be: second homes in Marbella built by planning lawyers salivating at the prospect.

Finally, the Government need to move beyond polarising the debate by demonising their critics. Today we have heard voices from all sides of the House— *[Interruption]* —from all sides of the House saying "Ministers must think again". We need to remember that whatever amendments the Government make, they are making the most fundamental changes to a national planning system that has been in place for 60 years.

I ask the Minister to respond to this. Does he agree that, once the changes are made to the draft national planning policy framework that have been demanded by Members on both sides of the House, there will be a second process of consultation? In particular, will he indicate now that the transitional period should, as we have argued, be extended? Will the Government ultimately have the courage of their convictions and hold a vote on the final national planning policy framework—in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords—so that we can have a system in which the public can put their trust for years to come?

5.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Stunell): There was a great deal of consensus in the debate up to the point when the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said that he was hearing voices. I welcome this opportunity to debate the Government's proposals. The new national planning policy framework is an important document and we have had a positive and constructive debate on it, covering not just the NPPF but the broader context of the Localism Bill. Debate on this subject has been carried on outside the House as well as inside it not just today but for the last three or four months—and we are all the better for it. The Government are making time available for further discussions in the House of Lords on 27 October.

As of this morning, 13,700 responses have been received to the consultation, of which some 3,700 are substantive individual ones. The debates in the two Houses will be taken into consideration. Indeed, if any hon. Members felt that their contributions were cramped by today's limitation on time, we will hold that door open for a few more days for them to submit written representations on the document. Quite a number of today's speakers have already sent in representations, which are also welcome.

We have heard contributions from 35 Back Benchers and interventions from quite a number more. That shows how important this issue is as a fundamental development in the way we approach the creation and safeguarding of communities in this country. This planning system is the way we make communities work. We create places we are proud of and proud to live in; we lay the foundations for businesses to grow; and, as has been a constant theme today, we develop a system that not only protects but enhances our green spaces, our parks and our countryside for our enjoyment, and for generations to come.

Bob Russell: On the preservation and retention of green spaces, the Secretary of State made a personal visit, for which I am most grateful, to see the fields of west Mile End in Colchester, which I hope can be saved. My concern is where local authority A decides to dump a large part of its housing right on the border of local authority B, which is what Tendring district council is planning to do on Colchester borough council. Surely the local decision making must be made by the people who are most directly affected and not by the local authority that is doing the dumping.

Andrew Stunell: I shall certainly respond to my hon. Friend, because the same point has been raised by others, including the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who asked how the duty to co-operate will work. I think that my hon. Friend is asking the same question. The duty requires—not allows, but requires—ongoing constructive engagement on all the strategic matters arising between councils when they prepare their local plans, and councils will be required to consider whether they enter into agreements on joint approaches and on the preparation of joint policies on cross-boundary issues. They will also have to satisfy the independent examiner of the local plan and to demonstrate compliance with the duty of co-operation when they do so. If they fail to satisfy the independent examiner, the plan will fail. That would be a powerful sanction to encourage council A to bear in mind the importance of taking into account its consultation and co-operation with council B. I hope that my hon. Friend finds that response helpful.

There is a pressing need for reform of our national planning policy. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington seemed to be caught betwixt and between. He accused us, on the one hand, of ripping it up, but, on the other, of arguing that we need a presumption of sustainable development. Perhaps the Labour Front Bench team needs to establish exactly what it believes is its principal criticism of what we are doing.

Joan Walley: The argument is not about sustainable development, but about its definition. We do not want a definition under which economic development simply trumps all the other aspects of sustainable well-being.

Andrew Stunell: I hope to cover that point more fully in a few minutes. The hon. Lady and I, surprisingly enough, are on the same page. It is not a question of whether to have sustainable development. In fact, the emphasis is on "sustainable" not "development". I shall come to that in a moment.

The current system is unworkably complex and has been criticised soundly by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. There are more than 1,000 pages of national planning policy and at least 6,000 pages of guidance. I challenge any Member, even if they have 26 years of professional background, to say, in all honestly, that they have read all 7,000 pages—nobody has. It is a long-running accident. The complexity of the system not only slows down decision making and frustrates the sustainable growth of the country, but alienates and frustrates local people. It does not allow for the rapid creation of the new homes that we desperately need for young families who are already struggling to scrape together a deposit or stuck on an endless waiting list, and it hinders the creation of the new jobs that will breathe fresh life into local economies.

That is bad enough, but on top of that, as all hon. Members have experienced, the planning system too often reduces people, at a local level, to impotent rage and denies them any real engagement in shaping the future of their communities. That cannot be a good system. A streamlined system focusing on key priorities will be more accessible and transparent. In the future, anyone who wants to understand the principles informing how decisions are made will be able to do so. That does not suit many of the professionals, but it should suit our constituents and the House.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): I agree completely with my hon. Friend. In constituencies such as mine, where there is pressure for much more affordable housing, it is exactly the sort of thing that my constituents would want to participate in. Does he share my view that, for it to work, the viability of development proposals needs to be open to full scrutiny? Often developers say, "We can only do 10% affordable property, because otherwise the figures do not add up." In reality, they could do more, but are never forced to reveal their hand and so sometimes get away with doing far too little.

Andrew Stunell: My right hon. Friend makes a very interesting point. I hope that he has encapsulated it in the representation that I know he has submitted to the consultation, and that if he has not, he will make a second submission.

[Andrew Stunell]

The Government are keen to put matters right. The new planning architecture of the national planning policy framework and the local development framework—the core strategies that have been referred to so frequently today—and the neighbourhood and parish plans must be taken together and seen in context.

Mark Pawsey: The Minister refers to the importance of plans. Does he agree that the essential purpose of the NPPF is to put those plans in place, and that local authorities that fail should be urged do so by both Government and Opposition, so that there is a template against which development proposals can be measured?

Andrew Stunell: My hon. Friend is right. I shall deal with some of the specific points that have been raised in a moment, although several of them are quite detailed, and I shall not have time to respond to all 35 Members who have spoken. We will make a serious effort to write to those whom I do not manage to respond to today.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I wonder whether the Minister can answer one point that was raised by a number of Members. Do the Government intend to introduce transitional arrangements, so that local authorities such as mine that were not encouraged to draw up local plans under the old regional spatial strategy system will have time to do so?

Andrew Stunell: The hon. Gentleman is a page ahead of me, but I will get there very shortly.

Of all the thousands of comments that have been made about the NPPF so far, very few have challenged the importance of both the simplification and the localisation that we have set out. I would have said that none had done so, but, funnily enough, a former planning Minister, the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford), said that he was one of those who considered this to be the best of all possible planning systems. His view was somewhat contradicted by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State's quotation from Lord Rooker, which demonstrated that that simply was not so.

Quite properly, today's debate has largely concerned the precise shape, the exact wording and the detailed nuances of what we have proposed in the NPPF and the Localism Bill. Let me now deal with some of the key points made by Members. I will begin by tackling what seem to me to be some of the principal issues. One is our use, or rather non-use, of the word "brownfield". We have referred instead to land of the "least environmental" quality.

There is a clear reason for that. We think that land of the least environmental quality should be taken first, and we recognise that some brownfield land is of high quality. It may be the quarry that has been left for 40 years and is now the next best thing to a self-managed wildlife sanctuary, or it may be back gardens. There are a number of circumstances in which brownfield land may have become recreational. Indeed, there is an example in my constituency that is sufficiently contentious to be prayed in aid. Using brownfield land as a planning category and turning it into the first priority for development will prove to be a mistake in some instances. At the beginning of the debate, my right hon. Friend said in his emollient way that we were taking careful account of all the representations we have received, and we certainly are in that respect.

Martin Horwood: I entirely sympathise with my hon. Friend's wish to move to a definition of environmental value, but, as I pointed out in my speech, even that reference in the NPPF is heavily qualified by reference, again, to development and growth. That rather undermines the point that is being made.

Andrew Stunell: Given that my hon. Friend's submission to the consultation is longer than the NPPF itself, I am sure that it covers that point.

My right hon. Friend made it clear—not for the first time—that there will be transitional arrangements, but it would be presumptuous to set them out before our friends in the House of Lords have disposed of the Bill or it has returned to us. We therefore must approach this issue in a measured fashion, but we understand the points that have been made, even if the critics appear to be a little confused about whether the result of the proposals will be a slowing down or a speeding up of development. Certainly, uncertainty is unwelcome and needs to be dealt with.

Jack Dromey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Stunell: I am sorry, but I do not have enough time.

On the presumption in favour of sustainable development, the debate has focused on the term "development" rather than the term "sustainable". Some good points were made, both in our debate and in the representations we received, about alternative ways of approaching this issue and, as my right hon. Friend said, we are bearing them all in mind. However, let me quote from a 1949 planning circular:

> "In cases where no serious issue is involved, and where the authority can produce no sufficient reason for refusal, the presumption should be in favour of granting the application."

Things have moved on since then, and we have a plan-led system, but the presumption in favour of sustainable development that we propose will strengthen that plan-led system, not undermine it.

I have already commented on the duty to co-operate. The right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich cannot be in the Chamber now, but he gave some statistics, and I want to put on the record that home ownership fell to its lowest rate since 1990 during the 13 years of the Labour Government, and that they managed to combine that reduction with a 440,000 fall in the number of social and affordable homes. Regardless of what the planning system delivered, the Labour Government certainly did not deliver.

Several Members emphasised the importance of bringing empty homes back into use, and the Government agree. We have set aside £100 million to fund a programme to achieve that, and we are also about to launch a consultation on other measures that can help. I welcome the broad support this will receive in the House.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley) said the planning system must be consistent with the Government's other aims. She referred to the natural resources White Paper and the work of the Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but we should also mention the work being done by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Treasury to generate growth. The planning system must reflect both the priorities of the Government and the priorities of local communities. This debate is about how we can get that balance right.

This debate has been a small but significant part of the important process of building a planning system of which we can be proud—a system that supports growth and change where that is needed to create jobs and homes, that creates health and prosperity for all communities, and that enhances and preserves our country's unique natural and built environment. To respond to another point that was made in our debate, that includes 20th century buildings.

We must establish a planning system that leaves future generations admiring our foresight, not condemning our selfishness. I believe the framework we have produced can do exactly that, and I urge the House to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Mr Speaker: We come now to the Adjournment debate. I appeal to hon. Members who, inexplicably, are leaving the Chamber to do so quickly and quietly so that the rest of us can hear from Mr Henry Smith.

Air Passenger Duty

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Angela Watkinson.)*

6 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. May I say how extremely grateful I am to have the opportunity to hold this Adjournment debate?

In this place I might be known as the hon. Member for Crawley, but my constituency is perhaps better known for being the home of Gatwick airport, the world's busiest one runway, two terminal airport. It is also home to a number of significant aviation industry companies, such as Virgin Atlantic Airways, TUI Travel and British Airways. My arguments for not increasing air passenger duty and for simplifying the system are not simply parochial; Great Britain's historical success has been not only as a politically assured, innovative country, but as a trading nation, and we have a unique set of global links. In addition, approximately 30 million hard-working Britons save each and every year to fly off on well-deserved holidays.

Like the debate we have in the Gatwick area about the future of the airport and whether or not it should expand, the debate on the future of APD is about balancing economic growth and the needs of environmental protection—I care passionately about both. It is right that aviation should contribute to dealing with its environmental impact, but that needs to be put into perspective and weighed against its economic contribution. Aviation accounts for about 5.5% of UK total emissions. To put that in context, road transport emissions account for about 18% and energy production emissions account for about a third of the UK total. In addition, it should be noted that the aviation sector contributes some £53 billion to UK GDP and employs almost 1 million people, in addition to the further 1.5 million employed in our tourism industry, and that about half of this country's population fly each year.

The history of APD goes back to the early 1990s, when a charge of £5 was introduced for flights to EU countries, with a £10 charge for flights to rest of the world destinations. Under Labour, over the past decade, that was significantly hiked up to a point where British aviation taxation has become by far the highest in Europe—indeed, it is eight and a half times the European average. It is worth noting that only four other European countries charge a form of APD, with a further five European countries—Denmark, Belgium, Norway, Malta and the Netherlands—having abandoned the charging of APD. The Dutch Government abandoned APD as a taxation because it brought in the equivalent of £266 million to their exchequer but cost an estimated equivalent of £950 million to the Dutch economy.

For our own Government's part, I very much welcome the announcement that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made in the last Budget on the freezing of APD. I also very much welcome the taxation of business jet aviation for the first time ever, so long as the collection of that tax does not cost more than it brings in. I very much congratulate the Government on their consultation on the future of APD in order to get the widest possible view on that. That is all in stark contrast to the Labour party, which did not even mention the issue in its pre-election manifesto and does not seem to have a plan B, although we are quite used to Labour not having a plan A on the economy.

Mr Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): This is the second time I have come to listen to what the hon. Gentleman has to say and I had hoped that his speech would be somewhat non-partisan. I remind him and the Minister that the Conservative party said in its manifesto that it would move to a per-plane duty and would not keep the current banding system, which is seen to be wholly unfair. I hope that both the hon. Gentleman and the Minister will address what will be done to remove the unfair anomalies in the system.

Henry Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right that a per-plane duty was discussed and I understand that there were some legal problems with it. It is important that we as a country should finally get right the future of aviation taxation in the round, not only for the sake of hard-working families who want to enjoy a holiday now and again but, most importantly, for our economy.

Quite apart from what we think in this place about the future of APD, let me quote what a few others have said. Southern rail has added its concerns about a future increase in APD by saying:

> "Any tax regime that has the potential to impact negatively on Gatwick Airport's growth plans also has the potential to impact on Southern's growth plans. We work closely with the airport and in recent months we have seen growth in airport passenger numbers and growth in its public transport market share. We would not want this momentum to be lost or hampered as this will impact on the medium term growth aspirations of our business".

The airport has said:

> "Gatwick is a family airport. Our passengers pay £400 million in APD every year, which goes straight into the Treasury's coffers. It is difficult to understand why hardworking families, whose household bills are rising every month, should pay so much extra just to go on holiday. For many of them, it's a luxury they save all year to afford."

The Gatwick Diamond Business Association, which represents all the economy and not just the aviation sector in the sub-region, has said:

> "The tax regime is having a negative impact on the UK's ability to connect with emerging markets."

In his speech in Manchester just a couple of weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out how one of the keys to UK economic growth is the need to connect better with the growing markets in Asia and South America. The Gatwick Diamond Business Association went on to say:

> "Increasing tourism from the Far East is important too and in total the hospitality sector is the fifth largest in the UK. This could grow by 10% over the next five years alone…provided they are given the ability to derive their fair share of the forecasted growth in global travel."

Another local firm in the Gatwick diamond area, CGGVeritas, has taken about 1,500 flights to meet its global customers in the past year and estimates that it has paid up to £50,000 of its budget just on the APD portion of those air tickets.

Virgin Atlantic, headquartered in my constituency, takes the view that aviation has a critical role to play in UK tourism and the wider economic recovery through encouraging visitors to these shores ahead of the Olympic and Paralympic games, but this economic potential is being stifled by ever increasing levels of air passenger duty, which are already the highest in Europe.

Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate not once, but twice, not least because it gives me the opportunity to welcome the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to her new role—a well-deserved promotion. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of the problem with this issue, with which I am very sympathetic, is the fact that there is a gap between the Treasury and the Department for Transport in that the Treasury leads but the Department for Transport is required to produce plans for airports and aviation?

Henry Smith: I am grateful for that intervention. The holy grail of government is joined-up government, with all Departments and the Treasury working together. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General is doing a great job in trying to achieve that.

The World Economic Forum's international tourism competitiveness report ranked the UK 134th out of 138 nations for air taxes, and we are beaten only in the amount we charge by the west African countries of Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mali and Chad. The chief executive of British Airways said:

> "Aviation in the UK is the most undervalued and overtaxed industry in Britain. We want to play our full part in assisting Britain's economic recovery, but we are held back by levels of tax on flying which are higher than anywhere else in the world".

and added that the increases would cost BA an extra £100 million and put more pressure on ticket prices. At the recent launch of a new Air Asia X route from Kuala Lumpar to London Gatwick, its chief executive stated that it is commercially more difficult to operate from the UK than from France. He pointed out that 10% to 12% of its passengers flying from Paris to Kuala Lumpar are British nationals. That gives a sense of the shift that passengers are already starting to make.

Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): We in Northern Ireland have an interest in airport duty. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is an irony that we, as island nations that have to use air transport to make those important international connections, are taxed so highly in comparison with many other regions? There is also a challenge in trying to join up what happens not just with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and other Departments, but, particularly in terms of the growth of our economy, with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Henry Smith: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I have been pleased to see that in the context of Ireland, between the north and the south, there has been some improvement. Her point about our being island nations and relying on trade—and therefore in this day and age on aviation—is extremely well made.

The chief executive of the Association of British Travel Agents has said:

> "It is vital that the Government understands the damaging impact that APD is having on the tourism industry in the UK. We already pay the highest levels of aviation tax in the world, and if the Government goes ahead with its double-inflationary increase and levies"—

as will happen on 1 January with the European emissions trading scheme tax—

> "on top of this…we will see another eye-watering increase in the tax burden on the industry and on holidaymakers".

The CBI has also rightly highlighted the fact that aviation is a critical pillar of the UK economy. Crawley-based companies such as TUI Travel, which is perhaps better known in the domestic market as First Choice and Thomson Holidays, are world leaders in developing biofuels to mitigate their environmental impact. Indeed, I am delighted that just a couple of weeks ago, they started regular biofuelled flights. Virgin Atlantic, another local company, has invested in the very latest new aircraft with the highest environmental standards.

In addition to those quotes from the industry, I should like to outline some figures that clearly demonstrate how the UK's aviation tax burden is significantly in excess of those of our nearest competitors. As I have said, we already charge by far the highest in Europe. To fly from the UK to a European destination, we charge £12 in APD, whereas Germany charges £7 and France charges just a single euro to travel within the EU. To travel from the UK to New York, we charge £60 in APD, whereas the Germans charge £22 and the French charge just €5. To travel from the UK to Sydney, Australia, we charge an APD rate of £85 at the moment, whereas Germany charges £39 and France charges just €5. I do not think that anyone can accuse the Germans of not being astute in economic or environmental policy.

If APD were to increase from next April, there would be a huge percentage increase in just six years. For example, a family of four travelling on holiday to Florida in economy class in 2006 paid £80 in APD, whereas they would currently pay £240. If the increase goes ahead, they would pay £260 in 2012, representing an increase of 225%. A business party of four travelling to Shanghai in premium economy in 2006 were charged £160 APD; currently they are charged £600 and in 2012, if the increase goes ahead, the charge will be £656, representing a percentage increase of 310%. My final example is that of a retired couple travelling to Australia to visit family, again in economy class. In 2006, they would have been charged £40 in APD, currently they would be charged £170 and in 2012, if the increase goes ahead, they would be charged £186, representing the biggest percentage increase of 365%.

Simplifying APD would benefit not only citizens of the UK but Her Majesty's subjects in the overseas territories. For example, the Government of the British Virgin Islands are rightly concerned that, as currently structured, APD is charged at a higher level to travel there than to fly to the west coast of the United States because the system is based on where the capital of a country is. It should not be forgotten that there are five British overseas territories in the Caribbean, as well as the many other Commonwealth countries around the world.

Before I conclude I wish to refute one suggestion mooted recently, which is that London and south-east originating flights should pay an enhanced amount of APD compared with the rest of Great Britain. I am very much opposed to that proposal because it would be unfair, unnecessary, economically misguided and environmentally dubious. It is unfair because, as I have said, we already pay one of the highest duties in the world. Millions of people living in the south-east and London should not have to pay extra just to fly from their local airports. It is unnecessary because the proposed growth of regional airports between now and 2050 is significant.

The proposal is economically misguided because while proponents of the policy say that it would rebalance the UK economy by moving key business routes to regional airports, it misunderstands the fundamental economics of long-haul business routes and ignores the fact that London's airports serve the whole British economy. Indeed, London is a global-class city and, with the south-east, a world-class region, connecting with and competing against the likes of southern California, the east coast cities of Japan and China, the greater Frankfurt area and the Ile de France among others. Finally, the proposal is environmentally dubious because it perversely risks increased carbon emissions if south-east passengers drive hundreds of miles to regional airports for cheaper flights. More indirect flights—for example, London Heathrow to Manchester; Manchester to New York—would result in more movements and more take-offs and landings.

In conclusion, I believe that if APD is increased further and not simplified we risk damaging growth by increasing the tax burden on families and by giving our European competitors an unfair advantage in a global market. Additionally, it could create an unintended, negative environmental impact when we are already more than off-setting our aviation carbon emissions, and that is before we join the European trading scheme in the new year. Indeed, the TaxPayers Alliance, using the Department for Transport's own figures, has highlighted the fact that, following the APD increase in 2007, aviation more than covers the cost of its environmental impact by at least £100 million. It also points to research by the Economic and Social Research Institute which found that doubling APD back in 2007 might have actually increased emissions because it reduces the relative price difference between near and far holidays.

In welcoming the Minister to her position and congratulating her, I appeal to her and the Treasury to think again, for the sake of our economy and our hard-working families, about increasing the APD burden further still.

6.18 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Chloe Smith): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on securing this debate and thank him for his response to the air passenger duty consultation earlier this year.

I will address the content of my hon. Friend's speech and some of the specific points raised by hon. Members in a moment. First, let me say as the new Minister responsible for APD that not only did it fall on my desk with a thump in my first week, but the main challenge is to get the policy right for the long-term benefit of passengers, the industry, the economy and those who have responded to the consultation. I very much agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of the aviation sector. That goes without saying for all of us here in the debate. It employs substantial numbers of people—my hon. Friend's constituents and others—directly or indirectly in the UK and is among the most productive sectors of the economy. I recognise that aviation is also an enabler and a catalyst for many businesses in the UK. The hon. Members for Belfast East (Naomi Long) and for Luton South (Gavin Shuker) pointed out the vital need for joined-up government so that we can get taxation and regulation functioning sensibly together and contributing to growth in the economy.

[Miss Chloe Smith]

Let us be very clear: we all want UK aviation, and sectors such as the travel industry that rely on aviation, to succeed. That was the starting point for the APD consultation launched at Budget. It is why my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), spent a lot of time over the past year talking and listening to airports, airlines and various organisations, including those overseas, to understand their concerns, and I hope to do the same. I note that she will be spending more time on transport issues than she might have anticipated only a few days ago. It is because we understand the pressures facing consumers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley has outlined very capably, that the Chancellor froze APD in the Budget in March.

Despite that, some people have called for a cut in APD. We must be frank about the situation in which we find ourselves, as my hon. Friend has said. When we came to office last year, we inherited a fiscal deficit of historic proportions, and action has been necessary to try to steady the ship, if you will forgive another transport pun, Mr Deputy Speaker. If we are to put the economy back on the path to sustainable growth, it is imperative that we tackle the deficit and that we take contributions from all parts of society. Unfortunately, I cannot promise the House that APD will be cut in the near future. I know that many hon. Members are concerned about other aspects of APD, including the changes that the previous Government made to the structure of APD in 2009. My hon. Friend has referred to some of those changes and their impact on our Commonwealth partners.

Many stakeholders have complained about the previous Government's changes to the banding structure of APD. Some have pointed to the anomalies created by that structure, including my hon. Friend, and we have received a number of representations from those who feel that flights to Caribbean destinations are unfairly penalised. Following in my predecessor's footsteps, I will hold a series of meetings with stakeholders on that subject.

Mr Slaughter: I congratulate the Minister on her appointment, although she has been handed a bit of a poisoned chalice.

My constituents who travel regularly to the Caribbean are concerned about the anomaly. Before the election, the hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who was then shadow Economic Secretary, often posed in photographs with Ministers from the Caribbean and gave assurances about those anomalies. We understand that many other assurances will not be kept, including on the move to per-plane duty. Will the Minister at least give us the comfort that the Caribbean anomaly, if I can put it that way, will be addressed, whatever the Government propose?

Miss Smith: I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that I shall carry on meeting representatives from the Caribbean and, indeed, from Australia and New Zealand very shortly, to discuss those concerns. I am afraid, however, for reasons I shall come on to, that it is rather difficult at this precise moment to give him further assurances, because the Government are due to respond to the consultation. I shall shortly deal with the detail of that, and with his points about per-plane duty.

The good news is that the consultation enabled Ministers to go into all those issues in more detail. The hon. Gentleman will know that in the Budget, the Chancellor announced that, for the first time, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley described, APD would be extended to passengers flying aboard business jets, which is another important feature that we have made clear. That addresses a clear unfairness in the system, and the consultation invited views on how that should be addressed.

I cannot promise the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Mr Slaughter) or anyone else that we will meet everyone's wishes, but we will try to deliver an APD system that is fairer, simpler and more efficient, and the Chancellor will set out those details in due course. On the hon. Gentleman's point about per-plane duty, to make the position clear, the UK's international obligations in that area include air service agreements with more than 150 countries, including the 1944 Chicago convention. We will not introduce per-plane duty at present because of concerns about legality and feasibility. We will, however, work with international partners to continue building consensus.

Gavin Shuker: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Smith: Briefly, as I must conclude.

Gavin Shuker: I want to make just a small observation. Before the election, the Conservatives campaigned on moving to a per-plane duty. Given the complexity that the Minister mentioned, can she shed some light on why they said that they would do so?

Miss Smith: The glory of coming into government is that one realises that all sorts of things are worse than one imagined, and that is a case in point. As I have said, the legality and feasibility of that approach have been clarified quite extensively.

I will touch briefly on the question of the devolution of APD. As hon. Members will know, the Chancellor announced that from 1 November 2011 the rate of APD for direct, long-haul passengers departing from Northern Ireland will be cut to the short-haul rate, which I hope we all agree is good for constituents in Belfast East and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. That measure was in response to the unique challenge facing Northern Ireland and is designed to ensure that local airports remain competitive. However, in order to provide a permanent solution to the issue, the Government have launched a process for the devolution of APD to the Northern Ireland Assembly. We are working in close consultation with the Executive to take that forward. I would also like to offer my thanks, and those of my predecessor, to members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee for the diligent and helpful input they provided on the issue.

Let me also say a few words about APD and the regions, which hon. Members may be interested in. We received around 500 responses to the APD consultation, many of which related specifically to the question of regional APD rates. It is certainly fair to say that there is no consensus on the matter. Some regional airports have asked us to consider lower APD rates for the regions, but several airlines and hon. Members have asked us to consider the opposite. I note the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley in this regard.

On that question, and on the broader reform of APD, the Government aim to publish a full response to the consultation later this autumn. We will of course take into account the views expressed in this debate.

There is one other issue that has been raised which I must address quickly: the environmental impact of aviation. We must recognise the scale of the challenge that confronts us. Since 1990, CO_2 emissions from UK aviation have more than doubled. In 2010 they accounted for around 6% of total UK CO_2 emissions. As other sectors decarbonise over the coming decades, aviation emissions are likely to make up an increasingly large proportion of total UK emissions. The Government's approach to this problem is a pragmatic one. The international nature of aviation requires an international response, which is why we support the inclusion of aviation in the EU emissions trading system from 2012. At the same time, the Department for Transport, in true joined-up fashion, is considering the best way to tackle local environmental impacts as part of its aviation policy review.

I know that some have called for the abolition of APD once aviation enters the ETS, but I must point out, as others have done, that APD is fundamentally a revenue-raising duty and currently raises around £2.5 billion a year. The forecast revenues that will result from aviation joining the ETS are only around £0.1 billion a year, reflecting the fact that under the relevant EU directive most of the allowances for the system will be given to airlines for free. In looking forward, however, the Government will assess the revenue requirements from aviation taxes, including those from the ETS, in the round.

In conclusion, I hope that we can continue to have constructive debates in a way that helps deliver a tax system for air transport that is fair and sustainable for the long term and puts us on a positive footing in the world. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley again for bringing this matter to the attention of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

6.28 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Friday 21 October 2011

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

9.34 am

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims (Amendment) Bill

Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.

Third Reading

9.35 am

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This is a little Bill, although it is considerably larger than it was on Second Reading, but it is now fit for purpose, as the Minister might put it. I thank individuals on both sides of the House, including Opposition Front-Bench Members and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr Blunt), and his team I also thank the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children for quiet support. Sometimes quiet support is best.

Finally, and most important, I thank the recently retired Met police officer, Detective Chief Inspector Dave Marshall. He has worked with me on a successful run of legislative changes to enhance the protection of children: six down, one to go—or one and a half to go.

The Bill will assist the prosecution of people who hurt children or vulnerable adults and those who stand by and allow such acts. It means that when a child is seriously physically harmed, or when the actual cause of death is not specifically identified, those who carried out the abuse or stood by can be prosecuted. The defence of passing the blame will go. If I have had one regret during what I hope will be the speedy passage of the Bill, it is that the maximum sentence is only 10 years, but I accept that it is appropriate when other sentences are available and can be considered.

Assuming that this is the last hurdle, I hope that the Bill's progress through the other place is speedy.

9.36 am

Mr Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): In 2004, the previous Government introduced the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act. Section 5 was written to address a particular situation: a gap in the law dealing with cases when a child had died at the hands of one or other of its parents, or other members of the household, and no one would admit to what had been done. To be guilty of the offence, the household member must have either caused the death or failed to take reasonable steps to protect the victim.

The NSPCC had campaigned on the issue, and the Law Commission did a great deal of work on it. While the 2004 Act was under consideration, there was a debate about whether the legislation should include serious harm cases and the point was made, both in this and the other place, that the term "serious harm" would need careful definition. Importantly, the then Government left the door open for the issue to be addressed again in the future. As the Minister at the time, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Paul Goggins), said:

> "I do not rule out extending the offence at some time in the future. It is important, first, to put in place the new offence. Let us get that right first and see how the provision operates. If appropriate, we may return to the problem at a later date."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2004; Vol. 425, c. 1473.]

[Mr Wayne David]

Since the passage of the 2004 Act, between 2005 and 2008 alone the offence of causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable adult was used successfully to prosecute 17 people, notably baby P's mother, boyfriend and lodger. It was clear that one of them caused Peter's death, but the police could not prove which of them was directly responsible. As a result, they were all found guilty of causing or allowing his death.

Crown Prosecution Service data suggest that there is now a need to extend the law to cover cases of serious injury. In 2010, CPS prosecutors in six areas identified 20 potential cases involving children and three involving vulnerable adults that could not be prosecuted under existing legislation, but which they believe could have been prosecuted under the proposed new offence.

It is clearly time to return to the issue. That is why the Opposition support the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). We congratulate him on all his assiduous work. The Government suggested two amendments, which were accepted by the hon. Gentleman. The amendments will strengthen the Bill and now, with cross-party support, I hope that this important measure will soon be on the statute book and be implemented quickly.

9.39 am

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I shall not detain the House long, but I just want to express my strong support for the Bill. I have only recently had the great privilege of becoming a Member of Parliament, and in the short time that I have been in this place I have learned that some of the most effective parliamentarians are those who do not appear on "Newsnight" every night of the week and are not always twittering and blogging and filling up the airwaves, but who quietly and effectively champion causes from the Benches of this House. Years and years of assiduous work for a cause can result in massive positive change for people's lives throughout the country. We see today that there is no greater exemplar than the hon. Member for Molve Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who over many years has championed causes.

Today a small gap in legislation is being filled and a problem tackled. That will lead to hugely beneficial changes, which will protect many vulnerable children from unspeakable abuse. We were all shocked when we saw what happened to baby P and others around the country. The measure will send a loud message that anybody who is caught perpetrating any of the crimes covered by the Bill will be brought to justice and feel the full force of the law. I congratulate my hon. Friend and commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Member—for Mole Valley—will appreciate the tribute that has just been paid to him.

9.41 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I too congratulate the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on pursuing this cause. I am happy to support the Bill. The definition of domestic violence is relevant not only to this Bill but to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill—I hope this change will go through, just as I hope we may at some point see some changes in the definition of domestic violence that is used in that Bill. I am pleased to support the Bill this morning.

9.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Crispin Blunt): My first duty is to congratulate the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr David). I think this is the first time that we have met across the Dispatch Box following the reshuffle on the Opposition Benches, so I welcome him to his place. I congratulate him on the crisp way in which he presented Her Majesty's Opposition's support for the Bill, following through on the support that his hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Mr Slaughter) gave it in Committee.

I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on steering the Bill through the House to this stage. This very worthwhile measure would provide increased protection for children and vulnerable adults who are at risk of serious physical harm from members of their own household, and it is a prime example of my hon. Friend's unstinting efforts to protect vulnerable people, especially children, from harm.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) about what makes an effective parliamentarian. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley, who is my parliamentary neighbour, has had an outstanding wider political career, first as leader of a London local authority, for which he was properly recognised by Her Majesty, then in this place, starting on the Back Benches and then as a Minister with responsibility for local government, and after that, both in opposition and now, as an absolutely unstinting champion of children at risk. Mr Speaker, I know that you, along with the rest of us, have a special place for my hon. Friend for the work that he has done. You will recognise, as we all do, that when Members take up a cause and drive forward on a narrow agenda, it is remarkable how much progress they can make and how much influence they can bring to bear. The Bill—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister's encomium to the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) will be appreciated by the hon. Gentleman and by many Members of the House. Of course it is perfectly proper for the Minister to spend some time focusing on the contents of the Bill, which doubtless he will do, but it would be very regrettable if the impression were to gain ground that he or others on the Treasury Bench were in any way reluctant to get on to the matters in the Bill to be promoted by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) and I am sure that no such consideration is in the Minister's mind.

Mr Blunt: You are of course entirely right, Mr Speaker. No such thought had crossed my mind; indeed, I have taken rather a limited interest in today's remaining business because this is the only item on which I have focused my attention. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley is also my parliamentary neighbour, so I hope you will be kind enough to allow me the enthusiasm with which I am able to present the Government's support for the measure, and allow me to record my appreciation and that of the Government for the work that he has done in this regard. However, bearing in mind your advice, Mr Speaker, I am happy to turn to the Third Reading of the Bill before us.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): He's got a lot of pages to get through.

Mr Blunt: The hon. Gentleman says I have a lot of pages to get through. Perhaps this is the moment to put on record my appreciation of the support that I have received from staff in the Ministry of Justice, who have helped my preparation and advised on the amendments that were tabled to the Bill at an early stage and which my hon. Friend accepted in Committee, which improved the Bill and allowed it to enjoy Government support.

As we have heard, the Bill's purpose is twofold. It extends the offence in section 5 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 to include cases of causing or allowing serious physical harm to a child or vulnerable adult, and it applies evidential and procedural provisions similar to those in section 6 of that Act to the extended offence. Extending the law in this way was contemplated when the original legislation was passed, and has continued to be urged since. The section 5 offence of causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable adult broke new ground, and the associated evidential and procedural provisions were controversial so a staged approach made good sense, but the existing provisions have worked as intended and we agree that the time is now right to extend them. Cases in which it is clear that serious harm suffered by a child or a vulnerable adult must have been sustained at the hands of one of a limited number of members of a household should not founder because there is insufficient evidence to point to the particular person responsible.

The crucial aspect of the section 5 offence is that the prosecution need not prove whether the defendant is responsible for causing or allowing the victim's death, so the defendant will be convicted of the same offence whether he was personally responsible for the unlawful act that killed the victim or if he was a member of the household that failed to take steps to protect the victim when he knew, or ought to have known, about the risk of harm that existed in that household. This means that it is much harder for those co-accused of the death of a child or vulnerable adult to evade justice by virtue simply of remaining silent or of blaming each other. The section 5 offence has been used successfully in a number of cases, including the profoundly shocking one of baby Peter Connelly.

The section 5 offence is a serious stand-alone offence that carries a high maximum penalty—14 years' imprisonment—but the aim was, and remains, that the person who caused the victim's death should be identified and convicted of murder or manslaughter, if appropriate. Those offences, of course, carry life sentences. Accordingly, section 6 of the 2004 Act modified certain evidential and procedural provisions in relation to alternative charges in trials involving the section 5 offence. The modified procedures apply when a defendant is charged with the section 5 offence and with murder or manslaughter in the same proceedings relating to the same death. The procedures are intended to encourage defendants to give evidence, and to ensure that the more serious charge remains available if, during the trial, evidence emerges of who was responsible for the death. The Government consider the extension of those principles in the way proposed in the Bill appropriate and proportionate to the harm being addressed.

Restricting the extended section 5 offence to serious physical harm is consistent with the need to show a pre-existing risk of "serious physical harm" in subsection 5(1)(c) of the 2004 Act. The extended section 5 offence does not criminalise behaviour more broadly than is necessary. A broad offence that covered psychiatric harm, for example, could deter people from caring for vulnerable adults because they fear being prosecuted for failing to foresee a psychiatric injury. Similarly, restricting the modified procedures in clause 2 of the Bill to the more serious offences that are likely to be tried with the extended section 5 offence is appropriate, given the extraordinary nature of the provisions. A maximum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment for causing or allowing serious physical harm is proportionate when we consider the maximum penalties for causing or allowing death and for other offences of grievous bodily harm.

Concerns have been expressed about potentially criminalising those who are themselves vulnerable, such as victims of domestic violence; indeed, those concerns were raised during the passage of the 2004 Act, too. However, it is important to bear in mind the high threshold that must be met for an offence under section 5 to be made out. To prove the existing offence, it is necessary to show that the defendant either caused the death of the victim or allowed it by failing to take reasonable steps to protect the victim from a foreseeable risk of serious physical harm. What constitutes "reasonable steps" will vary, depending on the circumstances of the person and his or her relationship to the victim. The court will take all the circumstances into account.

If one of the defendants has been the victim of, or a witness to, domestic violence, the steps that the defendant could reasonably have been expected to take may be more limited than the steps that someone not suffering or witnessing that violence could reasonably have been expected to take. Depending on the facts of the case, the court may find that it was not reasonable for the defendant to take some of the steps that might otherwise have been available to them. The same principles will apply to the extended offence. In other words, the offence will be sensitive to the circumstances in each case.

As is the case with the existing offence, the extended offence will not apply when the serious harm resulted from an accident. Nor will it apply when there was one specific known risk within a household, such as a violent or abusive person, but the child or vulnerable person suffered harm from a different cause. The offence does not criminalise members of the household for allowing the serious harm if it was the result of an event that they could not have anticipated or avoided. The extended offence and procedures are intended, like the existing ones, to be a fair and proportionate package of measures.

As hon. Members know, the Government are committed to preventing the creation of unnecessary criminal offences. However, we consider the extension of the criminal law in the relatively limited way proposed in the Bill to be justified and appropriate. In reaching that conclusion, we have had regard to the possibility that those responsible for very serious injury may escape conviction; the vulnerability of both child and adult victims; and the special responsibility that members of the same household bear for the vulnerable with whom they live.

[Mr Blunt]

We have considered the evidence that is available on the harm that we are attempting to address by supporting this Bill. In 2010, chief Crown prosecutors in six Crown Prosecution Service areas identified 20 potential cases involving children, and three involving vulnerable adults, that could not be prosecuted under existing legislation, and that they believe could have been prosecuted under an extended section 5 offence, subject to the case meeting the two-stage test in the code for Crown prosecutors.

The Government have examined the Bill's financial consequences for the Ministry of Justice, using two sets of data. The first set, to which I have referred, was provided by the Crown Prosecution Service and was about the potential number of cases. Our estimate, based on the CPS evidence, is that the annual cost to the Ministry of Justice of extending the section 5 offence will be in the order of £20 million a year. That is not an insignificant sum, but the measure will provide increased protection for some of the most vulnerable members of society. That is why the Government have decided to support my hon. Friend's Bill.

My hon. Friend produced for us another set of data, supplied by a former member of the London Metropolitan police. Those data covered only children, rather than children and vulnerable adults, caught by the Bill. They suggested that the cost impact of the extended offence would, in a steady state of affairs, be £10 million a year. Having examined both sets of data, our view is that the cost is likely to be further towards £20 million a year, as we believe that the CPS study is rather wider and more comprehensive. There will inevitably be uncertainties about the case load and the likely sentence length that will arise from the new, extended offence, but I have set out the basis of our assumption.

The CPS data suggest that we are looking at around 150 cases a year, subject to the uncertainty to which I alluded. That forecast is based on the idea that the number of cases in 2010 will be representative of the number of cases going forward. The survey was undertaken by chief Crown prosecutors in Sussex, Northumbria, Merseyside, Norfolk, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley. They were asked to identify the number of cases in 2010 in which they had been unable to prosecute for grievous bodily harm or cruelty to a child, or grievous bodily harm to a vulnerable adult, because there was insufficient evidence on which of the members of a household who were in frequent contact with the victim was responsible for the injury. Those prosecutors identified a total of 20 cases involving children, and three involving vulnerable adults, that could not be prosecuted under any existing legislation, and which they believe could be prosecuted under an extended section 5 offence, subject to the case meeting the two-stage test in the code for Crown prosecutors.

Those areas collectively account for 15% of national Crown Prosecution Service business. If we extrapolate from those data, we get to a national figure of potentially 133 cases involving children, and 20 cases involving vulnerable adults. That is 153 cases in total, each of which, of course, will necessarily involve a minimum of two defendants. That is a broad estimate that makes assumptions about the volume of cases in the CPS areas that did not supply data, so the actual number of cases across the country could be larger or smaller. Of course, statistically, the size of the sample, as any statistician would make clear, brings its own level of unreliability to the data.

The data supplied to my hon. Friend indicate that over a three-year period from 2005-06 to 2007-08 there were 179 cases in which children suffered grievous bodily harm. Sixty-nine cases involved more than one suspect in a "Which of you did it?" scenario, and did not result in prosecution. According to the police, further scrutiny of those 69 cases identified at least 39 in which prosecution would have been probable had the section 5 offence been extended to include serious harm. That implies that there were about 13 cases a year over the past three years in London alone that would have been prosecuted under the extended section 5 offence.

We have been unable to verify the data—indeed, the police have acknowledged that they were partly supposition—which did not cover vulnerable adults. The CPS has looked at the papers provided by the police, but they contain insufficient information either to form a view on whether any of the cases could have been successfully prosecuted under an extended section 5 offence or in getting them to the CPS case papers. However, the financial implications are not insignificant if the Government are to accept the measure in the current financial climate. The fact that we are prepared to do so gives a sense of the importance that we attach to the measure and of our enthusiastic support for the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend. Members on both sides of the House have agreed to plug that particular gap.

You implicitly set me the challenge of managing to keep this going until 2.30 pm, Mr Speaker, but you will see that I have only managed to stagger on until 10 o'clock. Plainly, I did not begin to speak with any other intention, and it would be wholly improper to do otherwise. At least the time at which I shall conclude will satisfy you that I did not begin with any other intention.

Chris Bryant: Why stop then?

Mr Blunt: The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) tempts me, but I will ignore his remarks, as I wish to conclude by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley again, even at the risk of upsetting you, Mr Speaker, and by renewing my thanks to my officials in the Ministry of Justice who have assisted me in preparing the Government's response to the debate. I am delighted to commend the Bill to the House, and I hope that its passage through another place will be equally successful.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Equality and Diversity (Reform) Bill

Second Reading

10.3 am

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

There are two things that my Bill seeks to do. First, it seeks to prohibit affirmative or positive action by public authorities, and secondly, it seeks to repeal the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which removed the selection of candidates from the usual laws against discrimination, and legalised discrimination in the form of all-women shortlists.

I believe in equality of opportunity and fair chances for all, which is why I am very much opposed to the concept of equality of outcome, which means fixing a result before a process has begun. In the case of jobs, that can take the form of targets or quotas and, ironically, it means that there cannot be equality of opportunity. As a Conservative, and not a Marxist, that is something that I do not support. Without fair chances, there is no fair system, and someone will always be discriminated against. The Bill seeks to take away the obsession with equality of outcome, which has replaced equality of opportunity and meritocracy. Just like democracy, meritocracy has its imperfections, but it is by far the best option in the end. Social engineering and fixing processes are not right, as they have in-built, deliberate unfairnesses, and consequently, they are not only imperfect but unjust.

I should declare at the outset that I am the parliamentary spokesman for the Campaign Against Political Correctness, an organisation that I commend to everyone. I can only assume, Mr Speaker, it is only an oversight that so far you are not a member.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Was the hon. Gentleman appointed or elected to that position?

Philip Davies: I think that I was given the position on merit, and I certainly was not given the job because I am a man. I do not think that I was given it because I am white. I would like to think that I was given the position on merit. Most Members know my views on political correctness.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): As my hon. Friend will be aware, many new Members may not know those views, so perhaps he would like to enlighten them.

Philip Davies: It is unlike my hon. Friend to be so off the ball as not to know my views on political correctness, but for his benefit, I make it perfectly clear that I abhor all forms of political correctness, the restriction of free speech, and the way in which we try to rig jobs to get a particular outcome. I believe in merit, and that merit alone is the best form of action. Political correctness annoys the vast majority of the public, but it is not only the silly things. People concentrate on them, but it is the sinister side of political correctness that I do not like, including the erosion of free speech and people being made to feel that they are some kind of bigot or are xenophobic simply because they express opinions that other people do not hold. That is why it is time for the silent majority to stop being silent and stand up against the scourge of political correctness.

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): There is a genuinely serious and interesting debate here. For instance, 30 years ago, racist jokes were a staple for stand-up comics, and it was the early stages of political correctness that made that unacceptable. Would my hon. Friend like to see the return of the racist joke?

Mr Speaker: If the Minister would turn round and address the Chamber, we would be grateful.

Damian Green: Does my hon. Friend not agree that the return of the racist joke as a comedy staple would be unacceptable? He says that all forms of political correctness are unacceptable, but does he not think that that is pushing it a bit too far?

Philip Davies: No, I do not. I do not accept that political correctness has helped with those things. I think that political correctness hinders the process of tolerance, as it builds up resentment that would not otherwise exist. I totally disagree with my hon. Friend, as I do not think that political correctness helps with tolerance: it breeds intolerance and resentment, which is why I oppose it in all its forms. I am not here to defend people who are intolerant of others, as that is unacceptable. Equally, I do not believe that people should be intolerant of people who happen to have a different opinion from them, which we often see in people who try to preach the language of tolerance.

It is not a question of my supporting intolerant or bigoted people, but I do believe in free speech. If we believe in free speech, we have to believe that people have a right to say things with which we disagree and which we may occasionally find offensive. That is the whole principle of free speech. Free speech does not mean that people are free to say only the things with which we agree—that is a nonsensical definition. The fact that I do not happen to agree with what somebody else says would not stop me defending their right to say it.

The Bill specifically tackles one of the worst forms of political correctness, which is institutionalised political correctness. The Bill prohibits the use of affirmative or positive action by local authorities. So-called equality and diversity measures have taken over where common sense used to prevail. The tick-box mentality has far-reaching tentacles in our schools, hospitals and emergency services. Everywhere we look there is evidence of this obsession.

My opposition to the whole equality and diversity agenda is, first, that it is total nonsense in its own right. The terms "equality" and "diversity" have no real meaning, and they do not necessarily sit comfortably together. Secondly, such measures are highly discriminatory and do not sit well with those being discriminated against or, perhaps less obviously, with those supposedly benefiting from the discrimination. Thirdly, they are responsible for increasing, not decreasing, racism and sexism, in my opinion. Fourthly, they are a total and utter waste of our money.

So-called equality and diversity is nonsense because we are told that it is all about being representative and that it is essential for organisations and businesses to reflect the community they serve. It is rather patronising to think that the rules have to be rigged to enable women or ethnic minorities to get a job. People from

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ethnic minorities and women are more than capable and are sufficiently talented to get a job in competition with people who are men and white, on a fair and transparent basis. They do not need to have the rules rigged in their favour in order to get jobs, and it is patronising to suggest that they do.

The people who are really racist and sexist in this country are the ones who see everything in terms of race and gender. I do not. The gender, religion and sexuality of the person applying for a job should be irrelevant.

Mr Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Why does the hon. Gentleman think women are so under-represented in senior positions in industry?

Philip Davies: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will come to that later. He raises an important issue and I will tackle it directly. If he feels that I have not done so, I invite him to come back to me later and I will have another stab at it for him.

The idea of businesses and organisations reflecting the community they serve is nonsense. A certain proportion of our local communities are criminals. A certain proportion of people are sent to prison. Are we really saying that, because it is so important that all organisations and all businesses reflect the community they serve, a certain proportion of every organisation should be made up of criminals because they make up a certain proportion of the population? That is nonsense. Nobody seriously believes that every organisation should reflect the community it serves. That is just trite.

Nobody—and I mean nobody—who I know is remotely concerned when white men are under-represented, so the issue is not really one of equality and diversity at all. The aim is to make some people more equal than others. To illustrate the point, I note that there seem to be very few male midwives about, yet nobody, to my knowledge, has seriously suggested in the House that there should be positive action to try and ensure that 50% of midwives are male. Similarly, the number of white men, or indeed women, who work in Indian restaurants up and down the country is not an issue, nor should it be. The first thing that crosses my mind when I go into a south Asian restaurant is how good the chicken madras is and how well it has been cooked, not what sex or ethnicity the waiters and chef are. That is the way it should be.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has the hon. Gentleman looked at what percentage of people who apply to be midwives are men, and what percentage of men subsequently get a post?

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. I will deal with it later. One of the things that my Bill tries to repeal is the legislation providing for all-women shortlists. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman might like to ask himself the same question when it comes to the number of women MPs—how many of those people put themselves forward to become MPs, against the number who are selected. He may find the answer to his own question in that conundrum.

Apart from those whom one would expect to oppose equality and diversity measures, there are many others whom those who push political correctness would rather sweep under the carpet, as their views are inconvenient to the argument.

Mr Nuttall: On a couple of occasions my hon. Friend has referred to political correctness. Will he provide the House with a definition of the term?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Political correctness is one of those things that is very difficult to define, but people know it when they see it. I will have a go for my hon. Friend. I would say that political correctness is the promotion of positive discrimination and the restriction of free speech carried out in the name of minorities, but usually initiated by white male middle-class lentil-eating sandal-wearing *Guardian*-reading do-gooders with too much time on their hands and a misguided guilt complex. My hon. Friend may have a better definition and I am happy for him to offer one. That is my initial stab at a definition of political correctness.

Mr Nuttall: Is it true to say, then, that the political correctness agenda is not set by those whom the white middle-class males seek to "protect"?

Philip Davies: That is my experience. Most of these measures are not perpetrated by the people whom they are supposed to help. On many occasions the people in whose name it is supposedly done are the ones who feel most patronised by it and find it most unhelpful. I encourage my hon. Friend to go to the website www.capc.co.uk which gives some examples. There is a section there called "Not In My Name" where many people say how unhelpful such measures are for those in their situation, whether they are people who are gay, women, disabled or from an ethnic minority. There are countless such examples.

Mr David: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting argument. Does he believe that, in society, freedom of speech should allow anything to be said, or does he think there must be some limits—some restrictions—in order to ensure freedom?

Philip Davies: My view about freedom of speech is that anything should be able to be said, except—the law is very good on this—for example, something encouraging someone to violence. That is unacceptable. It is clearly criminal. But people should be able to express an opinion, whether I happen to agree with it or not. If we go down the line of saying that there are certain things that people should not be allowed to say, we face the question who decides that. Who decides what people are allowed or not allowed to say? Whose values do we accept? The hon. Gentleman may be content that everything he says falls within the parameters of what is allowed, but what happens when he wants to say something that someone else has deemed not permissible?

When we have got to the stage, as we have in this country, where ordinary decent people are petrified about what they say in case some zealot somewhere down the line takes offence at it, which is the situation that many of our constituents find themselves in, we have a problem. For the country that is for ever going round the world trying to promote freedom, we should be well aware that some of our constituents feel that freedom of speech is being eroded under our noses.

It is telling that we are very precious in the House about the fact that we are allowed to say anything in the House and we cannot be taken to a court of law on the basis of what we have said. Our freedom of speech is totally and utterly protected. The hon. Gentleman can say something incredibly controversial and he cannot be taken to court on the basis of what he said. However, he seems to be suggesting that he should be able to say anything he wants in here but that everyone else, including his constituents, should be subject to some kind of state control over what they can and cannot say. That is not the kind of country I want to live in, even if it is the kind he wants to live in.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman slightly overestimates the value of freedom of speech in the House. It is true that a Member could, in theory, say absolutely anything, but you, Mr Speaker, would upbraid them if they misused or abused that freedom, as happened earlier this year with a Liberal Democrat Member. There are also things that we are simply not allowed to talk about in the House, most notably the royal family and their activities.

Philip Davies: That is a separate issue, but the hon. Gentleman has made his point.

The point my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) made about how the people political correctness is supposed to benefit do not actually feel the benefit has also been made by Anjana Ahuja. Writing in *The Times*, she explains how her opinion was once sought by the newspaper's executives on how to attract non-white writers. The paper planned to offer internships to ethnic minority candidates who had graduated in media studies. She says:

> "It was well intentioned but misguided, I ventured, because I knew of no colleague whose passport to these venerable corridors had been secured by such questionable means. There were historians, linguists, lawyers, classicists, philosophers, biologists, physicists, even an Egyptologist—but no media studies graduates. My view was this: if a brown writer sails in on an easier ticket than a white wordsmith, The Times would be construed as patronising rather than progressive and the intern would struggle against whispers of lowered standards...which is why, in the miserable tale of Ali Dizaei, the Scotland Yard commander convicted of corruption, the fact that sticks out most is the continued, seemingly pointless and possibly harmful existence of the National Black Police Association. Substitute 'black' with 'white' and an outdated collective becomes an illegal organisation that is morally impossible to defend. Why partition members of the same profession along the lines of skin colour? I would not join an organisation for black journalists (or female ones) because its identity lies wholly in the exclusion of white hacks (or male ones)."

Batook Pandya, director of Bristol-based charity Support Against Racist Incidents, has said of a positive action scheme that meant that fire service open days were limited to ethnic minority recruits only:

> "None of these open days should have been closed to white communities. I couldn't give two hoots if they are white, black, Asian, male or female—they should simply be the best person for the job."

Roshan Doug, writing in the *Birmingham Post*, has stated:

> "I don't want people promoted purely on the basis of the colour of their skin—call it 'positive discrimination' or something else. To me that's rather patronising—as if Asians and blacks are a little more than token staff to appease the CRE... I would like to see the best men and women for the job."

I believe that people are appalled, and rightly so, when they hear that a white person has been turned down for a job because of the colour of their skin. The same people would be appalled if anyone, whatever their ethnicity, was turned down for a job simply because of the colour of their skin. When that happens, it inevitably leads some people wrongly to conclude that the benefiting group in question has asked for this special treatment. As I made clear earlier, that is not the case at all. Some politically correct do-gooder has tried to do the right thing or, as is increasingly the case and perhaps more worryingly, someone is trying to comply with equality law.

Speaking for the Liberal democrats on the Second Reading of the Equality Bill, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), now the Minister for Equalities, said:

> "I turn to positive action. It seems completely illogical that we should be allowed to fast-track the training of ethnic minority and women police, but not be allowed to fast-track their employment. The rebalancing of the workplace is hugely important, and I do not disagree with the Leader of the House's vision of the bank boardrooms of the future. When both the genders make a decision, it is likely to be more balanced."—[*Official Report*, 11 May 2009; Vol. 492, c. 581.]

That is just the sort of thing that winds people up. If people want real equality, it must be just that, not some groups being more equal than others. What has a young, white male ever done to deserve being turned away from a dream career in the police force simply because he is the wrong colour and the wrong gender?

Mr Nuttall: That is a very important point, because it seems to me that, where positive discrimination is being exercised, young, white males are today paying a price for the fact that their forefathers were not subject to those measures in years gone by. Why should that be so?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Perhaps we also ought to reflect on the fact that in many parts of the country the people who are finding it most difficult to get a job are young, white males from very poor and deprived backgrounds. They are among those who are finding it hardest to find employment. It must be a double kick in the teeth for them to find that they are denied the opportunity to attend a fire service open day simply because they happen to be white. I really do not know why on earth should have a Government who are prepared to sit and tolerate that kind of thing.

Mr Nuttall: Does my hon. Friend think that those feelings may have played a part in the riots that took place this summer?

Philip Davies: I am not sure about that, to be honest, because it is very difficult to know. As far as I am concerned, the riots were largely born out of opportunism and criminality. I would not like to provide any kind of excuse for the behaviour we saw, but I do not doubt that many people feel a resentment and frustration that would otherwise not exist. I do not know whether the riots had anything to do with it, but I certainly think that the worrying increase in support for the British National party in recent years was born out of such frustration. It is no good Members complaining about the rise of such wholly unacceptable parties and then pursuing policies that are meat and drink to those

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parties. If we are to stop people voting for the BNP, we must remove the frustrations that led them to do so in the first place.

The cost of all these equality and diversity plans, action points, schemes and training courses is immeasurable, but one thing we can be sure about is that they cost an awful lot of money. I would always oppose such needless expenditure, but at a time when people are losing their jobs, having to tighten their belts massively and fearing what the future holds, it is even more inconceivable that so much money is thrown down the drain each year in the public sector on the equality and diversity agenda. The Government Equalities Office spent a whopping £62 million in the year to March 2011, and other Government Departments have their own equality budgets on top of that. That is before we get on to local police forces, hospitals, fire brigades and schools, which all have to spend their money on equality and diversity measures, taking it away from front-line services.

To give one example, the North East Ambulance Service NHS Trust is looking for an equality and diversity manager, with a salary of between £30,460 and £40,157 pro rata. The job description is "to act as a lead within the trust on the implementation of our equality strategy and action plan. The successful applicant will have a key role in developing the trust's approach to the new NHS equality and delivery system." Who in their right mind could think that an equality and diversity manager in an NHS ambulance service is a priority at this time, compared with a nurse or another ambulance driver? When someone dials 999, they want an ambulance, not an equality and diversity officer. What on earth is there to consider for the ambulance service? Surely if someone is injured they are looked after irrespective of their gender and race. It is all a load of nonsense.

There is another such vacancy, at the University of Greenwich, which is selecting someone to be its Equality and Diversity Champion, salary approximately £40,000—well, at least students now know where their tuition fees are going. The job description states:

> "You will be responsible for promoting an integrated approach to equality and diversity issues across the university, and provide Schools and Offices with a point of expert reference and guidance on equality and diversity issues. You will work with other university offices to continue to improve our performance as an employer and further develop disability access for staff. You will be an experienced equality professional with an ability to develop and implement policy."

Mr Nuttall: Would my hon. Friend like to venture how anybody could become qualified as an "experienced equality professional"? It rather suggests that there must be a whole career path for equality officers.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is right, and that is part of the problem we now face, because the equality and diversity industry—that is what it now is: an industry—is incredibly powerful. There is now a huge lobby, and so many people's jobs depend on the industry, that it is difficult to tackle, because as soon as anybody tries to argue against the point of such things, those people descend on them. My hon. Friend may well find that, and I am sure I will at some point.

Those people descend on others like a ton of bricks, because, although they believe in equality and diversity, they do not believe in the equality or diversity of other people's opinions; everyone has to agree with them on being against such things; otherwise, they are not entitled to that opinion at all. It always amazes me how such people, who always preach tolerance and diversity, are so intolerant of other people when they have an opinion that differs from theirs.

I prefer the person who drafted the advert for the Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University NHS Trust, who at the end of it wrote:

> "Usual rubbish about equality, equal opportunities employer etc."

That just about sums it up perfectly.

Mr Nuttall: I appreciate that my hon. Friend, for reasons that I know not, opposed last week's motion to allow electronic hand-held devices in the Chamber, but one great advantage of now being allowed such devices is that I was able immediately to follow his advice, go to www.capc.co.uk and access the website of the Campaign Against Political Correctness. On it, there can be found the "Not in my name" section, where Bolaji Alajija, a 42-year-old student nurse from north London, says:

> "I don't see why there is all the fuss. What's the harm in having a black doll? It's exactly the same as a white doll. People shouldn't be so sensitive."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I remind Members that, although they are allowed to use iPads, they have to make a speech without continuously reading from them. I am sure Mr Nuttall will take that on board.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, particularly as someone who voted against allowing these wretched things to be used in debates. If anyone was ever going to convince me that I made the wrong decision in that vote, however, it is my hon. Friend, who has gone to an excellent website, and I certainly commend him for doing so.

The second part of my Bill tackles the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002. I was not a Member when the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Bill was debated, but it will come as no surprise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to know that had I been I would have definitely opposed it. I have a great deal of time for many of my female Conservative colleagues, we have some extremely able MPs and, for the record, I have excellent female staff. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the greatest Prime Minister this country has ever had was, indeed, a woman, but I do not particularly care if the House is made up of 10% women or 90%. For me, that will never be an issue, so the fundamental premise of the 2002 Act will always be totally flawed.

The most important thing for me is not how many men or women are in Parliament, but how many Conservatives there are in Parliament, and I challenge anybody who is obsessed with the idea that the most important end in itself is that we have more women in Parliament. If, for example, a Conservative male fought a marginal seat against a Labour female, would any of my hon. Friends campaign for her on the basis that it was so important to get more women into Parliament, or would they campaign for him? I venture that they would campaign for him, because I am sure that for all Government Members, apart from of course the Liberal Democrats, it is far more important to have more Conservatives in Parliament than to be worried about how many MPs there are of a particular gender.

During the Bill's Second Reading on 24 October 2001, almost 10 years ago to the day, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), now the Home Secretary, said:

> "I shall be honest with the House. There was a time when I never thought that I would stand up in the Chamber and support such a Bill."—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2001; Vol. 373, c. 334.]

I wish she had stuck to her earlier opinion, as it would have been the more Conservative thing to do.

While my right hon. Friend supported the Bill, the former Member for Maidstone and the Weald, Ann Widdecombe, did not. In the debate, she said:

> "The Bill is fundamentally wrong. I must ask this question; are all the men in this place sound asleep? Do they realise what the Bill means for them? Have they thought that positive discrimination for women can entail negative discrimination for men?"

The irony is that, as those in the House at the time were already Members, they did not need to worry about candidates, so the Bill was effectively about kicking away the ladder of opportunity from men who had not yet reached the House. I wonder how those Members would have felt if they had been told, "Sorry, I know you would make an excellent MP, but we're going to stop you applying for the seat that you've lived in all your life, because you happen to be a man." How would any men present today have felt if such a rule had applied to them?

Ann Widdecombe also hit the nail on the head, when during the debate she asked:

> "What would that mean for a man in that constituency who had given to his local council the same lifelong service that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson)—

at the time—

> gave to hers"?

Mr Nuttall: I had the honour of standing against the then Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough in 1997. Does my hon. Friend agree that she was able to succeed in a northern, working-class city without any positive discrimination whatever?

Philip Davies: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is entirely right. People such as Helen Jackson made their way to Parliament on merit alone, and they should be commended for that. I am sure that they would not have wanted it any other way.

Ann Widdecombe went on to say:

> "Let us say that the man had worked there and escaped from there, and that he wanted to apply for the seat when it fell vacant. He would not be able to represent the constituency if all-women shortlists were in operation.
>
> "That would be the reality for men under this pernicious Bill, yet hon. Gentlemen welcome it as a great step forward. It is a massive step towards inequality for men, and the poor souls just let the women walk all over them. They do not appear to care what will happen to them."

And Miss Widdecombe also said:

> "I can tell the hon. Gentleman that when I entered a constituency selection committee and saw that most of the people there were women, my heart used to sink. We should not get the idea that discrimination against women is performed solely by men. It is not… If I had been in a selection committee anteroom with two men who had got there by beating off all the competition yet I was only there because a place had been reserved for a woman on the shortlist, I would not feel helped. I would feel humiliated, insulted and patronised. I am glad to say that my party never did that to me. —[*Official Report*, 24 October 2001; Vol. 373, c. 352-53.]

The fact of fewer women MPs is always blamed on discrimination, but in reality—certainly in the Conservative party—at the time of the Bill's discussion roughly the same proportion of women who applied for seats were selected. The lack of women MPs is, therefore, much more to do with the fact that they do not put themselves forward.

As India Knight put it so well:

> "I'll tell you what the issue is with women in business or women and work"—

and this deals with the point that the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr David) made earlier—

> "It is extremely simple. It is not to do with sexist dinosaur male bosses or with male-dominated industries crushing our genius. It is not to do with glass ceilings. It is to do, very straightforwardly, with the number of hours we are prepared to put in. If you're happy to work a 16-hour day and never see your children, you too can become a master of the universe.… Few women are prepared to make that kind of sacrifice. This is entirely their right and good on them. However, it is surely both dishonest and intensely stupid to apportion blame—in the form of so-called corporate discrimination—to what is essentially a completely personal choice: power versus being there at bath time, conferences versus the park, business trips versus getting home in time for homework, giving '110%' versus sleeping more than five hours a night."

The words of India Knight address the point made by the shadow Minister.

The 2002 Act was supposed to be temporary, and apparently was supported on that basis. I do not know many "temporary" things that have run for more than a decade. As things stand, the Act has a further two decades to go, it having been granted a massive "temporary" extension in the recent Equality Act.

Some people will say that we need more women MPs so that we can be more representative and so that women's issues can be addressed better. That is utter rubbish. It is ridiculous to suggest that women are more likely to be better represented by women and that men are better represented by men. I am very proud of the fact that I represent all my constituents—men or women—equally and to the best of my ability. I suspect—although I do not know for sure—that just as many women voted for me at the general election in Shipley as did men.

Mr Nuttall: Can my hon. Friend confirm that he also represents constituents of all races equally, despite being a white man himself?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that applies to all hon. Members. We treat all of our constituents equally and we represent all of them to the best of our ability, irrespective.

It is interesting that we keep hearing about "women's issues" as this seems rather sexist and patronising. What are "women's issues"? Many issues that are tagged as so-called women's issues are also important to men. I have often heard that education is a women's issue, but I would have thought that education was a family issue and was of just as much interest to men and fathers as to women and mothers.

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I venture that the issues that a Conservative woman is concerned about are more closely aligned with the issues that a Conservative man is concerned about than they are with the issues that concern a Labour woman. The idea that certain issues are women's issues is patronising and wrong.

Mr David: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that sex discrimination exists in our society, or does he think that somehow everybody exists in absolute equality?

Philip Davies: I have clearly been speaking in Swahili for the past half an hour. Yes, there is still sex discrimination, and it exists in the Act that my Bill is attempting to repeal. My Bill would make it illegal to have any form of sex discrimination. If that is the hon. Gentleman's agenda, I presume that he will support my Bill in the Lobby, because it would prevent any positive action or discrimination. It would guarantee that there would be no sex discrimination at all. Jobs would be given on merit alone. I therefore look forward to his support in the Lobby later.

The argument that all of this is optional, and that no party is forced to discriminate, is also nonsense. All parties in favour of bringing the law in were obviously highly likely to use it once it was passed. I am sad to say that on some occasions even the Conservative party appears to have fallen into this socialist trap.

Some people will say that it is all very well my giving my views on this issue, because—as a white male—I have had it really easy. But I agree with Kenan Malik who says:

> "I reject identity-based representation not only because the idea that one should be represented only by one's own kind is, and always has been, at the heart of the racist agenda, but also because such representation acts as an obstacle to what you call 'a genuinely participatory democracy'."

I always find it strange that people can say that they are not sexist and racist, but happily support measures and notions that are just that.

The public's view of all-women shortlists is also clear. At the 2005 general election Labour lost one of its safest seats, Blaenau Gwent, because of the party's politically correct obsession with all-women shortlists. Those who voted in the election were not just men: it was clearly offensive to women too. Where does it all end—quotas and targets for people based on their sexuality, their eyesight, their hair colour or their star sign? If not, why not? Why limit it to just gender and race? Why not go the whole hog and have discrimination based on people's background or hair colour or any of these other things?

I wish to play my trump card against opponents of this part of my Bill, and that is Baroness Thatcher. No whingeing, relaying of statistics, bleating on about unfair treatment or complaining about sexism can explain away Margaret Thatcher. Not only did she get selected as a candidate, which is apparently so difficult for women without this House rigging the rules in their favour, but she managed to become a Minister and, as we all know, a long-serving and excellent Conservative Prime Minister.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there are always exceptions to any rule?

Philip Davies: The point is that women can—although not in his party or in the Labour party. In our party, almost 40 years ago, a woman was quite capable of getting to the top on merit alone. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman thinks that the women in his party have not been good enough to lead his party—

Tom Brake: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will know that I am not of that view. I would also like to point out that in Wales the leader of the Liberal Democrats is a woman.

Philip Davies: If the hon. Gentleman thinks that the women in his party are more than capable of being leader, why have they not become leader? Is he saying that his party is sexist and does not allow women to become leader even though they are good enough to be leader? If he is saying that, he should not tarnish the Conservatives' reputation by trying to impose ridiculous laws. He should tackle the sexism in his own party instead, if that is why he supports this nonsense.

Margaret Thatcher was leader of the Conservative party—the very party that is constantly accused of sexism and appears to want to beat itself up about it—more than a third of a century ago. It gets even better, because she was clear, years after leaving office, that all-women shortlists should be avoided. In her book on statecraft she says that

> "the use of quotas applying to the appointment or promotion of individuals because of their collective identity or background is an unacceptable incursion on freedom, however well-intentioned the motives. Nor does it help those who are its intended beneficiaries. Individuals from these groups may well feel patronised; their professional reputations in posts which they would anyway have attained on merit are diminished, because they are thought to occupy them by special privilege; and they are likely to become targets of resentment and possibly even ill-treatment."

If any male Members are still in favour of all-women shortlists I say what I have always said to them—"Come on. Do the honourable thing and, instead of shafting other men who are trying hard to get into this place, put your money where your mouth is. If it is so important to you that you want to support legalised discrimination, go ahead, resign your seat so a woman can be selected in your place." That is the best thing that proponents of this approach could do, but it is amazing how few of them are prepared to do it. They are not so keen that there should be more women in Parliament that they are prepared to make space themselves to allow a woman in—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) says that I am talking drivel, but I look forward to him resigning his seat the moment the House rises so that a woman can take his place. Or is it that women should represent only other constituencies, not his? Until hon. Gentlemen are prepared to take that step, I am afraid that people will see through it as gesture politics of the worst possible kind.

People can say I am misguided, that I am missing something, that I need to be educated on the benefits of positive action and positive discrimination—but what would they say to all the people I quoted, who are from the very groups that equality and diversity moves are supposed to help? Would they say that those people were wrong and that they just do not get it, either, whatever "it" is?

This is a case of the emperor having no clothes. Most Members want to be seen to be in favour of nice-sounding ideals, and many confuse political correctness with doing the right thing. They do not want to be the ones to say that they do not get the whole equality and diversity agenda or, worse still, that it is having a negative effect on race relations and good community cohesion. I, however, am prepared to say that the emperor has no clothes. The whole concept of equality and diversity is, at best, a mistaken attempt to pursue a fantastical idea of equality, but, at worst, a dangerous piece of social engineering that encourages and praises discrimination against certain groups of people based on things they cannot change.

I do not believe that this is the right thing, and I certainly do not believe that it is a fair thing—and I am not alone. There are many, many people who agree with me. In an ICM poll, a massive 80% of people in Britain said that they were fed up with political correctness. Members will be delighted to hear that the poll was completely representative and covered a very diverse range of people. The vast majority of people in all categories said they were fed up with political correctness, including women and people from all ethnic origins.

Britain can truly hold its head up and say that it is not racist or sexist only when people are given jobs on merit, and merit alone. People should be given jobs regardless of their sex, age, race or sexual orientation, not because of any of these factors. This Bill gives the House a chance to vote for something that can undo one of the biggest inequalities around. It can vote to reintroduce fairness, to remove the clear injustice of equality of outcome in the name of equality and diversity, and to promote real equal opportunities for all. I commend the Bill to the House.

10.52 am

Mr Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I have been following the speech by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) very closely and taking a considerable number of notes. Unfortunately, I had to deal with something in my office but, alas, I could repeat almost word for word what he has said; however, I will not.

In my 17 years in the Commons, this is the most reactionary, right-wing, regressive Bill ever put to this House in a serious speech. The hon. Gentleman will probably take that as a compliment. However, there is something more profoundly serious at stake, because he represents a growing view within his party that the minor progress that we have made on equality in recent years has gone too far and should be reversed. The whole history of British legislation is precisely to use the power of Government and state to redress imbalances and unfairnesses, first, between those who did and did not have the vote—between the aristocracy and the non-noblemen in our communities—and, over time, through other positive action to ensure that there was full equality for all.

Some of the hon. Gentleman's proposals are ridiculous. He suggests that there can be no "affirmative or positive action" in order to help people depending on their "sex"—I think he means gender. Presumably, that would outlaw the recruitment of women into convents because they were nuns and not men, or perhaps rugby players should now be hired not on the basis that they are trained, fit, male athletes, but that they are women.

The very first pamphlet I ever wrote as a political activist—

Mr Nuttall: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr MacShane: May I just make my points, and then I will give way? I do not mean to be discourteous, but I want to be brief because I am conscious that other people want to speak on other issues.

The very first political pamphlet I wrote in 1978 was an appeal to the BBC and other media organisations to hire journalists who were not white—at the time, we would say they were from the Asian or Afro-Caribbean community—because there was not a single byline reporter or presenter of that description on TV, despite the fact that by then we had hundreds of thousands, if not more, among our fellow British citizens and journalists I worked with, but in subordinate roles for which they had been able to offer themselves. I am glad, 30 years later, that that is not the case. We do not have a mono-coloured BBC or ITV or bylines in all our great newspapers evidently comprising only sturdy British citizens.

Philip Davies *rose—*

Mr MacShane: If it is on that point, of course I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Philip Davies: It appears that the right hon. Gentleman has form in this regard. He was a white journalist who was insistent that somebody else should have to give up their job in order to make way for somebody from an ethnic minority, but apparently he was not volunteering to fall on his own sword. Now he is advocating that we should have more women in Parliament, and yet he still refuses to fall on his sword to help to make that happen. If he feels so strongly about it, why does he not have the courage of his convictions, put his money where his mouth is, and start doing the right thing?

Mr MacShane: The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong. I did fall on my sword, in the sense that the BBC made me do so by liberating me from its employment at the time. Whether I was replaced by a journalist from the black and minority ethnic community, I do not know. The point is that we expanded journalism, and yes, we went in for positive discrimination in the sphere of broadcasting, and I am very glad about that. Certainly, when the time comes for me to leave my position as MP for Rotherham, I will be delighted if there is an all-women shortlist. The real question that the hon. Gentleman's party has to ask is why, even with the all the people put on to the A-list, there are still so few women sitting on the Conservative Benches.

Mr Nuttall *rose—*

Mr MacShane: I will take just one more intervention, because I want to make my contribution very short.

Mr Nuttall: Going back to the question of rugby players, does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that women's rugby is a very popular sport?

Mr MacShane: Women's rugby and football, and other sports, are very popular. On the strict reading of the Bill, it would be illegal for Rotherham, Wasps or Harlequins not to entertain the notion of a woman rugby player, but I do not want to go too far down that road.

The notion that I find exceptionally offensive is that we make no efforts to help people with disabilities. We are facing thousands of people being fired from Remploy because of the wicked actions of the governing party. These are people who will find it incredibly difficult to get jobs elsewhere in the normal labour market. Quite rightly, in the 1940s, after the war, we honoured our war veterans by saying that those who came out of the war with particular disabilities could work in normal jobs and have the dignity of labour rather than living on handouts and the dole—but according to this wretched Bill, that, too, would be illegal.

On religion, we had an interesting discussion this week in Education questions about whether Cardinal Vaughan school in London can maintain its Catholic identity or, as some might wish, should no longer do so. I think that my many Jewish friends would find it very offensive, but oh so typical of the chauvinist, nationalist spirit that now reigns in the Conservative party, that they cannot define who comes into their schools on the basis of religion.

The whole balance of legislation, going back to the abolition of the slave trade and Lord Shaftesbury stopping children going up chimneys, was precisely to alter law to give particular protection to people who would otherwise be unfairly exploited on the grounds of their socio-economic status. I find it profoundly distressing that in October 2011 we are seriously being asked to rip up every decent parliamentary value that we and our predecessors have fought for over the years.

This is a Friday morning debate, and we all know that these Bills never go anywhere, but this Bill is symptomatic of the entire approach of the Conservative party. The Conservatives are refusing to support the International Labour Organisation convention on domestic workers because that, too, is aimed at giving a little bit of protection to people of a particular socio-economic and sex, or gender, status who are facing the most appalling exploitation in this and in other countries. Conservative Front Benchers have nothing to do with this Bill, of course, but the hon. Gentleman speaks for much of today's Conservative party. That is why the quicker it is replaced in government by a party or parties that support the standards and best values of Britain, the better.

10.59 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have listened carefully to what has been said in the debate, because I knew that it would be enlightening. I will make a few short points.

Of course I agree that people should secure employment and be promoted on merit. Unfortunately, often that is not enough to secure equal opportunity. Some people, such as Baroness Thatcher, may be exceptions to the rule, but very few people are exceptions to rules.

On positive action, I think it is entirely appropriate that, over a number of years, the Metropolitan police have taken measures to try to ensure that the police force in London is representative of London's communities. I think that that makes them more effective and more acceptable to the public as a whole.

On the point about midwives, the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) needs to consider whether there is a significant number of men who apply to be midwives and are refused on the basis of their gender, or whether men simply do not apply for those positions because they prefer to apply for others.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Liberal Democrat party. Clearly, it is a source of some embarrassment to my party that we have failed to secure the election of any members of black and ethnic minority communities to Parliament.

Mr Nuttall: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Tom Brake: In a minute; I will just finish my point.

It is also a source of embarrassment that the Liberal Democrat Benches do not have a more representative balance of men and women.

Mr Nuttall: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. He is making some important points. I urge him and his colleagues not to feel embarrassed if they have arrived at this place on merit. There is no reason to feel embarrassed for that.

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I would like to think that we have all arrived here on merit. The issue is that there are obstacles that often prevent others from arriving here on merit. He will know that, in politics, it is often helpful to have a network of people within a political party whom one knows and who are supportive. Often, women candidates or those from BME communities do not have the networks to help them progress in a political career. As he knows, there are other issues, such as financial issues. Anyone who wants to be a parliamentary candidate requires a certain amount of funding to support their political campaigning. That is not available to all.

I welcome the fact that the Liberal Democrat party has a leadership programme that aims to support women candidates and those from BME communities, to ensure that they are better prepared and better supported—financially, if necessary—so that they can compete on merit with other candidates.

Mr Nuttall: Would those funds be available to a young, aspiring, white, male politician from a working-class background or who is on benefits?

Tom Brake: I am grateful for that intervention, because the hon. Gentleman has given me the opportunity to confirm that that support is available to the sort of person he describes. That is because we recognise that people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds struggle to get elected as Members of Parliament.

Philip Davies: The right hon. Gentleman is hitting the nub of the issue. Does he think that the Conservative party, for example, would be much more diverse if it replaced Rupert from Kensington and Chelsea with

Jessica from Kensington and Chelsea, which is what the legislation he is defending seeks to do? Does he not think that it would make the party more diverse to replace Rupert from Kensington and Chelsea with George from Newcastle? That point is not addressed by the legislation that he is defending.

Tom Brake: If the hon. Gentleman will excuse me, I will allow him to push for the particular balance that he would like to see in the Conservative party.

The hon. Gentleman gave a description of people who worry about equality and diversity issues, which I thought was quite an accurate description in some respects of those who are obsessed with political correctness. He said that they tend to be white, male and have too much time on their hands. I would add that they mourn the loss of empire, are bitter at the loss of their undeserved supremacy and are stuck in the last century but one. That would be an accurate description of those who are obsessed with political correctness.

The Bill has one merit, in that it allows us to debate these issues. We should acknowledge that although merit is a fine thing, in practice there are many fields of life in which merit is not sufficient to ensure that people make the progress that they should be allowed to make. I therefore hope that the Bill will make no further progress.

11.6 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a great joy to be here at such an exciting moment in the parliamentary calendar. I sort of congratulate the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) on bringing forward the Bill, although it is a bit of a fib of a Bill because it is entitled the Equality and Diversity (Reform) Bill, whereas it should, of course, be called the Political Correctness Gone Mad (Abolition) Bill.

Philip Davies: I tried to call it that, but I was not allowed.

Chris Bryant: There is clearly significant prejudice against the hon. Gentleman in the Table Office. I should say that that prejudice is entirely shared by those on the Opposition Benches, and I suspect that it is shared a little by those on the Liberal Democrat Bench, which is a rather singular Bench today.

I start from the fundamental principle that we were all created equal. That comes from a religious position, although in my theology I am very heterodox—perhaps unusual for me. I believe that all human beings were created equal and that we, as politicians, should be seeking to ensure that that equality is reflected in the way that people are able to live their lives. I know humanists who come from a completely different perspective, but who end up at the same point of believing that we are all equal and that that equality should be matched in the way that we structure society.

The truth of the matter is that the world is not equal. There is inequality not only between rich people and poor people in a country, but between rich parts and poor parts of a country and between rich countries and poor countries. My fundamental assumption, therefore, is that it will always be a struggle to try to achieve equality, and not an easy one. One has always to try to match equality with fairness. Sometimes, when one is trying to achieve equality, which might be fairer in one regard, one ends up with another form of unfairness.

The hon. Gentleman, in the way that he styled his comments and in the way that he styles his politics, runs away too much from the desire for genuine equality in society. I will raise with him some work that was done a few years ago. It showed that if there are two five-year-olds with the same IQ, in so far as IQ can be measured at the age of five, and one is in a family where the household earns more than £50,000 and the other is in a household that earns less than £15,000, five years later—this is quite frightening—the two 10-year-olds will not have the same IQ; the child in the richer family will have a higher IQ. Labour Members are passionate about ensuring that the child in the household with an income of less than £15,000 has a chance of realising their genuine potential. They should be able to retain the IQ that they have at the age of five until they are 10, 15, 50, 65 or 75. That is one of the many problems that I have with the hon. Gentleman's Bill.

Philip Davies: I am sure we can all identify with the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises, and that we all feel equally exercised about it, but surely the way to tackle it is through the education system. We must ensure that it looks after people of all abilities. Surely the solution should not be to allow the education system to perpetuate the current situation, then rig the rules for selecting people for jobs at a later date.

Chris Bryant: Indeed, many of us who represent valley seats in south Wales, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Mr David), who is in his place, know the long history of people fighting for better education precisely as a means of trying to rebalance and recalibrate that inequality in society. People do not need to have seen the play or film "The Corn Is Green" to know the educational ambition that often exists in many valley constituencies or other areas in the country with very high levels of multiple deprivation. All too often, however, it does not seem that the same educational opportunity is afforded to somebody in the Rhondda as it is to somebody in Chelsea.

I see the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) in his place—as a Whip, he is now unable to speak, so I can tease him remorselessly. Since he dispatched his close friend the former Defence Secretary from his post specifically so that he could become a Whip, I shall now enjoy teasing his silence. My point is simply that those in Chelsea, who have much greater financial resources, can ensure that they live in a good catchment area so that their child can go to a better school, or can afford to send their child to a private school. I was very fortunate that members of my family paid for me to go to a private school, but that is not available to the vast majority of my constituents or, I suspect, to any of them. That is why ensuring that the educational system genuinely provides equality of opportunity is vital.

The most distressing thing that I have come across in my time as an MP was early on. I bumped into a girl of 17 in Tonypandy and asked her what she wanted to do when she left school. She said she wanted to be a barrister, and I said, "Brilliant, how's all that going? What are you going to study at university?" She said, "Well, I want to be a barrister, but I've been told by the

[Chris Bryant]

careers service that girls from the Rhondda don't get to be barristers." All too often such depression of ambition can be self-perpetuating in communities, and that is why many of us believe in an aspirational form of socialism so that everybody has a chance to prosper.

Mr Nuttall: Does that not actually reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that the education system is at fault? The careers adviser should not have said that to someone who had that ambition. He should have encouraged her and provided her with the help and support she needed.

Chris Bryant: Absolutely—I agree with the second part of that intervention, although not with the bit where the hon. Gentleman encouraged me to agree with the hon. Member for Shipley. Incidentally, I prefer the former Member for Shipley, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), and I very much hope that he will have an opportunity to present his rather ludicrous Bill later.

Philip Davies: I am sure the vast majority of my constituents also prefer the former Member for Shipley and regret the fact that they let him go when they had the opportunity to keep him.

I do not know whether the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was watching "Daybreak" this morning, but if he was he will have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Esther McVey) promoting her initiative called "If Chloe Can", which is designed to raise the aspiration of young girls in particular who have the poverty of aspiration that the hon. Gentleman talks about. Surely that type of initiative, which the Prime Minister supported yesterday with a reception at No. 10 Downing street, is a more important way of dealing with the problem than rigging the selection rules for jobs.

Chris Bryant: There seem to be an awful lot of Ruperts and Jessicas and Chloes in the hon. Gentleman's life. I think that the only Rupert who has ever crossed the border into the Rhondda constituency was Rupert Bear.

One of my experiences was as a curate in High Wycombe, a community that has a strong ethnic mix. A large community from St Vincent has been there since just after the second world war, and a large community from Kashmir and a large Polish community arrived in the middle of the second world war. I found that, all too often, in an unequal society the people who know how to shout the loudest get the best resources from national and local government. One of my problems with the educational system in this country, and for that matter with the national health service, is that all too often money has not followed need but has followed the loudest speeches. That is why I believe that we need equality legislation, and why I supported the legislation that the deputy leader of the Labour party brought forward in government.

Mr MacShane: I am following my hon. Friend's speech with great interest, and I hope that it is only in its initial stages, because the Bill that follows really is a ghastly assault on privilege and fair play.

Is it not a paradox that, even with equality legislation, every single person currently in the Chamber is white, middle-aged and male? That is not the case with those slightly outside the Chamber in the civil servants' box or the Serjeant at Arms' seat, but it is—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This is not relevant. We are dealing with the Bill, and Members should be speaking to the Bill. I am sure the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) does not want to get led all over the place. We have already seen that coming from the Government side, and I certainly do not want to see it coming from the Opposition side.

Chris Bryant: Thank you for that advice, Mr Deputy Speaker, although I think the hon. Member for Shipley will be absolutely scandalised to have been described as coming from the Government side.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not sure about being middle-aged, either, but do carry on.

Chris Bryant: I think you are middle-aged, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am pretty much there as well.

The problem that I have with the contention made by the hon. Member for Shipley is that I still think there is a great deal of prejudice in British society. It is complex and arises in all sorts of ways. I have seen in my constituency problems at school for young black kids in a community that is almost entirely white, and sometimes black teachers have had a really rough time because of the kind of language that people use. Language that would no longer be heard in most other parts of the country, where there is a racial mix, is sometimes still used.

I would also point out that the suicide statistics for gay young men in particular are still quite phenomenal. A young gay lad is six times more likely to commit suicide than his heterosexual counterpart, and I would love to see the end of homophobic bullying in schools. It will be very difficult to achieve, because people are not born with a pink triangle on their forehead or whatever—it is something complicated that they have to discover for themselves, and children can be very cruel. Tackling such prejudice will always be one of the important things for Governments.

Philip Davies: I absolutely accept that there is still discrimination in society, and I certainly did not say that there was not. The point of my Bill is to try to remove it. My question for the hon. Gentleman is this: how do we tackle that discrimination? Surely the solution cannot be reverse discrimination in favour of people who were discriminated against in the past. Surely it is to remove all forms of discrimination.

Chris Bryant: Well, no, not quite. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that the ambulance service, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned earlier, turned up at the household of a young Muslim woman who was in labour and having a difficult childbirth, and had absolutely no understanding of what was acceptable in a Muslim household. It would not be able to do its job properly. That is precisely why all public services need to be culturally sensitive not just to how Britain has always been but to how it is today.

When homosexuality was illegal—that era is fortunately long gone—and when David Maxwell Fyfe, as Home Secretary, ran a particularly nasty campaign of entrapment of gay men, some friends of mine, a couple who had lived together for many years, were burgled, but because they had only a one-bedroom flat, they were terrified of bringing the police round, because they knew that the police would investigate them for buggery rather than investigating the burglary.

I am afraid that there is a lack of understanding in far too many public services of how work could be improved by sensitivity to the ways other people live their lives—I would not say that there is deliberate prejudice, out-and-out racism, homophobia or sexism. In addition, many minority communities are simply forgotten by local authorities and the health service when they make their spending plans. That is one issue that needs to be addressed and one reason why the Bill is wrong.

Incidentally, there is significant cultural prejudice against the Catholic Church. I passionately disagree with the Pope on just about every issue, starting with transubstantiation. However, all too often prejudice against Catholics in society is quite marked and that is why it is not a good idea to ask people to give the name of their primary school when they are applying for public sector jobs. People will say, "Aha, this person went to the Cardinal Vaughan school! We're not very keen on Catholics, so we won't shortlist them." It is illegal to do that, but it would be simpler and better if that element were taken out of the equation.

The hon. Member for Shipley said that he wanted a tolerant society. That phrase is very often used—I believe that an Archbishop of Canterbury started calls for a tolerant society in the 1960s. However, I dislike the concept of a tolerant society, because I think that a respectful society is far more important. "Tolerance" implies that although someone completely and utterly disapproves of someone who lives in a different style—

Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con) *rose—*

Chris Bryant: I will tolerate the hon. Gentleman in a moment. Unfortunately, "tolerance" smacks of reluctance.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman starts tolerance in the 1960s, because surely John Locke did that in his essay on tolerance. The theme has run through Whiggish behaviour, of which he is symbolic, ever since.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I cannot see anything about tolerance in the Bill. I think we will stick with the Bill.

Chris Bryant: There is nothing in the Bill about tolerance. Indeed, one of the main problems with it is that it does not even aspire to tolerance, which is one of the many reasons why I oppose it.

The hon. Member for Shipley said—I am not paraphrasing, but accurately recording what he said—that women and ethnic minorities do not need the rules to be rigged in order to get jobs. He feels that the current legislation is patronising, because women and members of ethnic minorities are perfectly able to get jobs. I am not sure that that is true. In fact, the evidence shows that, all too often, the rules are effectively rigged so that women do not get jobs.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether Labour men who supported all-women shortlists were surrendering themselves and falling on their swords. I merely point out that we are all about to lay down on our swords, because we voted through the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill. I have no idea whether there will be a Rhondda seat or a Greater Rhondda seat, incorporating most of Caerphilly—that was my suggestion. I made no objection to all-women shortlists in the Labour party in 1997. I stood in High Wycombe, which was almost impossible for the party to win, and my election was not anticipated, although the Conservative party so completely destroyed itself in the 1997 election that I very nearly was elected.

All-women shortlists were then rendered illegal by court action. Interestingly, 10 Welsh Labour MPs stood down or retired before the 2001 election, and every single one was replaced by a Welsh Labour male MP—not a single woman was selected in any of those 10 historically safe Labour seats. I rejoiced that I was selected for the Rhondda in 2001, to many people's surprise, not least my own, but it is none the less important that political parties have the power to retain all-women shortlists.

Philip Davies: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could explain why no women were selected. Is it the case that none of those women who applied for those seats was good enough to be selected, or is the Labour party in Wales riddled with sexism and so overlooked better-qualified women to select men? Perhaps he should sort out the problems in his own party and not impose those ridiculous laws on the rest of us.

Chris Bryant: We are not imposing any laws on the Conservative party.

Philip Davies: All-women shortlists?

Chris Bryant: No. Choosing all-women shortlists is entirely up to political parties. Labour chooses to use them.

The hon. Gentleman asked why men so often get selected for safe seats, which is a problem for the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Labour. There are all sorts of complex reasons. Part of the problem is how we do business in Parliament, and part of it is how politics is presented in the wider public domain. There could be other prejudices out there. However, the Welsh Labour party has been immeasurably improved by the fact that we have a large number of women representing not only seats in the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Assembly Government, but heartland seats in Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman says that he does not care whether 10% or 90% of MPs are women, but I care. I want to strive to make Parliament as representative of the wider population as possible. That cannot be too narrowly arithmetical, but I want to see the full diversity of Britain in the Chamber. Otherwise, the work that we do is undermined. If people do not hear their voice expressed, there will be a problem. Incidentally, by way of another criticism of myself, there are probably too many MPs of a particular social background and too few of a manual working class background, unlike the position in the '20s, '30s and '40s.

Philip Davies *rose—*

Chris Bryant: I will move on a little if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

We in the Labour party need to address those issues. Many Government Members criticise Labour's relationship with the trade unions, but I make absolutely no apology for it. Many of the working class people who have come to the House have done so through the trade union route. They learned in the trade union movement how to do their politics and put their arguments, and they were financially supported so that they could put themselves forward for parliamentary nominations. They were selected on that basis, which is why I wholeheartedly support the relationship between the trade unions and the Labour party.

The hon. Member for Shipley seemed to suggest that there should be absolutely no limits to free speech. I mostly agree with him, and I believe in a free press. I worry sometimes about the direction of the Leveson inquiry. In my work in relation to the *News of the World*, my intention has never been to dismantle investigative journalism, which is an important part of how we do business and ensure our democratic rights. However, the hatred and the bigotry that some express sometimes goes beyond the pale. I want less hatred to be poured into the pool of hatred that is already out there. Some of the hon. Gentleman's arguments are similar to those that Ann Widdecombe used when she was in the House. I found that they simply added to the sum total of bigotry rather than diminished it. We should all be striving to diminish it, and I am glad that we have laws that prevent the incitement of not only racial hatred but religious and homophobic hatred. As we have seen over recent years, that legislation has been all the more important in areas where there is a real social mix.

I also believe that Parliament has been immeasurably better for having had more women in it in recent years. I honestly think that were it not for the arrival of so many women some issues would not have been explored and addressed with anything like the seriousness with which they have been. One example is domestic violence. For centuries, a woman was regarded merely as a chattel or another household good for a man to do with as he pleased. Those laws were changed in the middle of the 20th century, but only in recent years did the police and the law start to take domestic violence seriously. I am certain that in my constituency and many others a large proportion of violent crime relates to what happens in people's households or between domestic partners. I do not believe that the police would have the powers, will or resources to deal with that today had it not been for the arrival of significant numbers of women in Parliament.

I should note that today is the anniversary of the arrival of the first women peers in 1958. There were four of them, and they were a slightly strange lot. One was married to a viceroy, another was the daughter of a viceroy and another was a countess, so it was not exactly equality as we like to see it today. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg), also known as the hon. Member for the 15th century and for "Question Time", obviously likes that, however.

I am glad that the Government are moving forward with the issue of succession so that the prejudice—stemming originally from common law, not statute—that the succession should be subject to male-preference primogeniture should be changed. I also hope that the Government are moving—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We are drifting well away from the Bill. We enjoy the history lesson, and it is good that a lot of history is coming out today. However, it is certainly not relevant to the Bill; we are certainly drifting way off course. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will bring us back on course.

Chris Bryant: I do apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is just that clause 2 is entitled "Definition of 'affirmative or positive action'". The Prime Minister is seeking to change the legislation at the meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government next week and I worry that that could be seen by the hon. Member for Shipley as positive discrimination on the grounds of sex, listed in paragraph (b), and religion, in paragraph (g). I would hope that the hon. Gentleman was in favour of equality in the succession.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: How could I resist?

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I wonder whether it might be right to look at the matter the other way round. Is this actually a rather dangerous Bill that would impliedly repeal positive discrimination in favour of Protestants in the order of succession—and, of course, of men as well? Has the hon. Gentleman considered that point?

Chris Bryant: I do worry about the prejudice in favour of Protestants, although the issue is even more complicated. It is not quite in preference of Protestants, but in favour of somebody who is able to take communion in the Church of England and subscribe to its articles of religion, a difficult thing even for most Anglican clergy, as well as be a member of the Church of Scotland. That is quite a tall ask.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that clause 2(1)(g) might be problematic for true equality. Incidentally, I would not often say this but I support the striving for equality in the House of Lords advanced at present by Baron Fellowes, who is worried that his wife will not be able to inherit her title, because women in this country are not allowed to inherit titles.

There is still a problem in this country. Only 22% of Members are women. In the Labour party, all-women shortlists have played a significant role in trying to bring about a more equal and representative House of Commons. When we move forward to an elected second Chamber, I hope that we will be able to use the same legislation.

Philip Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman not believe that in a democracy, whoever is in this House should be determined by the electorate—not by him, imposing quotas on who should be here and who should not and what the make-up of the House of Commons should be? Surely that should be decided by the electorate and the electorate alone.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is then arguing for a system of primaries in every constituency at every election. I have not heard him call for that. I may have missed one of his speeches; I have tried to listen to all of them, although sometimes I wander off. That is not the parliamentary system that we have grown up with. Under our system, local political parties tend to choose their candidates and the candidates are then presented to the electorate. In the end, of course, it is up to the electorate. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the situation in Blaenau Gwent. A rather more complex set of issues arose there in relation to why we lost the seat. I merely point out that we now have extremely fine new Members, both in the Welsh Assembly and here.

I still think that we will need measures to ensure that the House is more representative than it has been thus far. The hon. Gentleman referred to what he called his "trump card"—Mrs Thatcher. I think that that was deliberate incitement; he was trying to get the Opposition to rise to the bait, and I am happy to do so. Unfortunately, Mrs Thatcher did remarkably little for women. If anything, she is the rule that proves that the exception proves the rule.

In Mrs Thatcher's period of government, the effect on women and household incomes, especially among the poorest, was devastating. Many communities that might have hoped for an opportunity to rise on the ladder of prosperity at the time were cast into the outer darkness. What she brought about was not, as she proclaimed, in the words of Francis of Assisi, peace, unity and concord, but division and discord. For many of us in the Opposition, she is not a trump card at all; if anything, she is a joker.

We believe that the equality legislation that we put in place was important and has enabled Parliament to be more representative than it was and to address issues that it would not otherwise have done. In the end, however, hon. Members will have to make a decision. Do they believe that the equality of humanity should simply be left to the market or do we need intervention before breakfast, before lunch and before dinner? I fall into the latter category.

11.38 am

Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): We have heard that the great lady, the noble Lady, the Lady of the Garter, Baroness Thatcher, is not to be called upon in this debate, so let us call upon Queen Elizabeth I instead. As she so memorably said, though her body might be weak, she had the heart of a king—and a King of England at that. She did not need special measures, advancement and protection to get her going; she did it through her own vim and vigour, her force of character and her great and noble ability that set the path for this great country for centuries to come.

Damian Green: I merely make the point that had the genetics fallen in a different way, she would never have become Queen, because of discrimination within the system of primogeniture.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: But she did become Queen. That is the point—that she was able to become queen because our constitution has always evolved gently and happily so that more and more people become included in it without necessarily being given a helping hand or a lift up. This is the key point to the Bill: we want to have equality of opportunity as an objective, but not equality of outcome. I think that is what has always divided the Conservative—the Tory—from the socialist: the socialist always wants equality of outcome. Socialists want to meddle and muddle; they want to socially engineer—or perhaps to engineer socially for the benefit of *Hansard* who do not like their infinitives to be split—and they want to make sure that they direct and control so that everybody should be made into a neat little machine. We have had this terrible socialist proposition recently that the elderly should sell their homes so that they can be put into properties that have fewer rooms. That is what it is all about; it is about controlling people, guiding their lives and taking away their freedoms.

When it comes to this Equality Act, to which my hon. Friend's Bill would make splendid improvements, with some caveats that I may come to, it is desperately condescending to women. They do not want to be looked down upon as if they cannot cope. I am going to speak of the example of my younger sister Annunziata Rees-Mogg, who was the candidate for Somerton and Frome, where she fought a noble campaign. I discussed this with her and I said, "Actually, for the political advantage of the Conservative party,"—I am all in favour of the political advantage of the Conservative party—"perhaps we should have all-women shortlists." It might not have helped me but it would have helped her and it might have answered a political problem for the party. She could not have been more strongly against it because she viewed it as condescending. She wanted to get the nomination for a seat on her own great merits—and very considerable her merits are, too. She did not want to be told she was a poor little thing: that is the sort of line an elder brother can use to a sister but it is not the sort of line that should be used by political parties or by the state. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) points out, from a sedentary position, that she lost. Well, she did because the Labour vote went down to 4%. Labour lost its deposit and that was to its horror when it discovered that the Lib Dems then supported us, so the aim to keep the beastly Tories out by voting Lib Dem failed miserably. Without that, she would have won by a landslide and I expect that next time around that will be the happy occurrence.

It is condescending to women to assume that they cannot cope without special measures and to people from what are genuinely minorities, because of course women are not a minority. Some of the time they are in the majority, although not at birth. There are more live births of boys than of girls, but women tend to live longer and therefore can easily be a majority of the population.

We have discussed Catholicism. The hon. Member for Rhondda said that he disagreed with the Holy Father on transubstantiation, but I cannot think why. It is clearly a very sensible and right doctrine. However, I do not think, as a Catholic, that I have any fear of discrimination, nor ever have had, although it did happen once to my father—my noble kinsman, as I ought to call him. He was going for a Conservative selection many years ago and was asked by one of the members of the committee if he would be able to go to the lord lieutenant's funeral as he was a Catholic, at which point another member of the committee pointed out that actually the lord lieutenant was the Duke of Norfolk,

[Jacob Rees-Mogg]

so there would be absolutely no difficulty in my father's attending his funeral. But he did not need special measures to help him. He had to get on and, if there was discrimination in those days, to overcome it, to strive and move forward—as, of course, Margaret Thatcher did and Nancy Astor too.

We have seen in the development and evolution of this House that it has become broader based. One might think that the days when it was simply knights of the shires, when the borough Members had not been let in, were glorious days when the knights of the shires could come in wearing spurs, as I believe we still can, to indicate that they represented a county.

Chris Bryant: Wrong!

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I believe it is true, actually.

Chris Bryant: It is not.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I believe it is true.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do not think we are going to have an argument and a history lesson across the Chamber. I am sure the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will either intervene or be slightly more quiet.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Mr Deputy Speaker, I was shocked at such a sedentary intervention. I have never known such things in this House before.

But things evolved and we let the borough Members in, and we now look upon them as equals.

Chris Bryant: That probably takes the biscuit for lèse majesté—"We let the borough Members in"! I know that the hon. Gentleman has been here for a very long time in some shape or form, but to suggest that we have now become representative when he himself is the son of a peer seems a little odd.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his typically helpful intervention. Of course sons of peers should be represented, and they are a minority too. Perhaps as a son of a peer I should be given special help and intervention to help me to get through all the prejudice there is against sons of peers—not that I would ask for it or that I have ever noticed a particular prejudice against sons of peers. Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that such prejudices never fall upon so distinguished a figure as yourself either.

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend may have seen the press reports today regarding possible new legislation to allow females to take hereditary titles in the House of Lords. Does he agree that this is the way forward?

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Well, I do not really like change as a general rule, and I would be very nervous about intervening in the line of succession to the throne. I think that the line of succession to the throne works very well and changing the Canadian constitution is a particularly difficult thing to do. With Her Majesty's fantastically successful visit to Australia, we want everything to have a settled continuity of that succession. However, I think that the world has changed and that it may not be unreasonable to allow hereditary titles to pass through the female line, particularly if they are in danger of becoming extinct, because it would be a great sadness for titles to die out over succeeding generations with no new hereditary peerages being awarded. I must briefly declare an interest, because my mother-in-law would be able to resurrect a title if this law were to be changed.

Chris Bryant: Could she not just petition the Queen to allow her to hold it sui juris?

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I am not sure that that is—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think we are getting into too much detail about one's relatives and we are also drifting, once again, away from the Bill. As much we are all enjoying it I think we had better come back to the Bill.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for bringing me back on track. I remember that there was a wonderful slogan of the Conservatives at one point, "Britain's on the right track. Don't turn back." That is really what we want in speeches from this side—we want to stay on this right, Conservative track. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is very much on the right Conservative track with his Bill about looking at opportunity, not outcome, and to place on public authorities a duty of fairness to behave properly and not to pick winners. We know that the state has tried picking winners in the past and it is not a good policy, because the state is not going to do that well. It wants to do things on merit.

I agree very much with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley on political candidates as well. They ought to be the ones the local parties want and not people sent down from on high. If the local parties want a man, that is up to them, and if they want a woman, that should equally be up to them. Of course we want to ensure that there is a very fine list of the best possible candidates that they can choose from, but they should have the ultimate choice and the ultimate authority. Those of us who believe in localism would like the law repealed so that it is unlawful to discriminate in that way. In safe seats, such as Rhondda, discrimination could give somebody a seat for life, with a significant income, which would be unfair to people who might have done the job equally well and may have been more wanted by the electorate to whom they were accountable. Parties need to be conscious of their power in safe seats.

There is, as always, a but. I was concerned about the point made by the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr MacShane) who said that the Bill would outlaw nunneries because they could represent discrimination by a public authority in favour of women. I am not sure that point is right, because if Her Majesty's Government or any other public authority—the Charity Commission, for example—were to support nunneries and monasteries equally, there would be a balance, and as there may be more monks than nuns in this country it might be positive discrimination in favour of men, if it were any discrimination at all. I do not think that criticism of the Bill actually holds. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Member for Rhondda want to speak? It is very difficult to pick up all these sedentary interruptions, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman does not have to pick them up; he can choose to ignore them.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Your guidance is helpful to the nth degree. I am greatly appreciative of it and I shall now make sure that I imitate the deaf adder: charm the hon. Member for Rhondda ever so nicely, I shall not be able to hear. We remember the deaf adder from our scripture lessons; as the hon. Gentleman is a former vicar, he will no doubt be able to call it to mind.

I am slightly concerned that the succession to the Crown could be affected, but I think the Bill could be amended to make it absolutely clear that there will be no effect on the succession and that the discrimination that remains is germane until such time as it is settled on its own in a different way—if ever it is to be changed. As a Catholic, I do not think it is a good idea to open the succession to Catholics; it would make no sense to have a Catholic as the head of the Church of England and it would be a pity to disestablish the Church of England by accident.

I am broadly in support of the Bill. The real principle is that we must not be condescending to people who can do it for themselves. We must embrace freedom and liberty. We must let people have every conceivable opportunity and then let them strive, go forward and work to achieve what they can and what they will. We must not say that we have to make sure that the number fits the box. We must not take the broad principle, to quote a former Labour Cabinet Minister, that the man in Whitehall really does know best, because the man in Whitehall does not know best, and even if he becomes a woman she still does not know best. It should be left to individuals, and we should avoid this socialistic tendency to try to get equality of outcome, which we will in fact never achieve.

11.51 am

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is always a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg), who spoke with such authority on the matter. I am a sponsor of the Bill and am obviously rising to support it.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for bringing us the Bill. Millions of people across the country will be saying, "Hooray" this morning because at last somebody has started to roll back the tide of political correctness. I am pleased to be joined in support for the Bill by my right hon. Friends the Members for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) and for East Yorkshire (Mr Knight), and my hon. Friends the Members for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady), for Christchurch (Mr Chope) and for Kettering (Mr Hollobone).

I want to follow up one or two of the points made by earlier speakers. The first is about racist jokes. Over the years, the nature of comedy in this country has changed, but we must not think that because we have changed it means that racist jokes were restricted only to this country. I understand that in Canada jokes were often told about the Newfoundlanders—the Newfies. No one took offence. It was part and parcel of their way of life—their culture—just as we have Irish jokes. It is not demeaning in any way.

Like the Bill's promoter, I am a Yorkshireman and we also have jokes about Yorkshiremen. Jokes about sections of the community are common. I have often heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs tell jokes about Lancashire, and, indeed, I have heard him telling jokes about people from Sheffield and Rotherham. Nobody took offence at that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): They may not have taken offence, but as we both know, there is nothing about jokes on the face of the Bill. I know that an argument is being built, but I think we can move on from the jokes now—much as I am tempted by the mention of Yorkshire.

Mr Nuttall: Earlier in the debate the question was asked: can we take equality too far? Does it mean changing the nature of our society? Can we take free speech too far? In the same way, when I was young—

Philip Davies: You still are.

Mr Nuttall: Thank you. We always used to talk of lollipop ladies. Nobody ever suggested that there ought to be a recruitment drive for lollipop men and nobody thought it was demeaning in any way that there were lollipop ladies and not—as far as I was aware at that time—any lollipop men.

The Bill has only two main parts. The first two clauses relate to the prohibition of positive action by public authorities and the third clause repeals the legislation allowing for all-women shortlists, which I shall come to later. Clause 1 sets out the details of the prohibition of positive action and clause 2 contains the definition of the action that would be outlawed. Positive action, as it is often called, differs from positive discrimination in that it is actively intended to increase the representation in a work force where monitoring has shown a particular group to be under-represented in proportion to the profile of either the total work force or the local or national population.

Positive action permitted by the present anti-discrimination legislation allows a person to provide facilities to meet the special needs of people from particular groups in society in relation to their training, education or welfare and to target job training at people from certain groups that are under-represented in a particular area of work or to encourage such groups to apply for such work. That raises some interesting and difficult questions. What is the area in question that should be considered? If a business or a public authority is situated in the south of England in a predominantly ethnically white area, should they be exempt from the legislation? Well, of course they are not exempt, and it must be difficult for some public authorities in certain areas to meet the quota because it is impossible for them to decide what area they cover. Does one look at the town in question, or the county, or the country, and if so, which country? Does one look at the United Kingdom as a whole or just the make-up of England? Of course, many areas covered by the present legislation are not easy to determine.

[Mr Nuttall]

An example is sex or gender, to which the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred. Very often, it might not be possible to know whether one has a certain number of gay or heterosexual people in one's work force. Indeed, I would submit that the information is of absolutely no consequence or relevance whatever.

I should perhaps declare that before I entered this House, I was for many years an employer, so I know all about the rules and regulations that were imposed on my practice as a result of equality legislation. Before any of the legislation was in place, just off our own bat, I had a work force who were 95% female, so in fact, in my work force, men were not equally represented. No one suggested to me that when I came to employ another secretary, legal assistant or solicitor, I should start to select men; I always selected the best person for the job.

Chris Bryant: Whether a large proportion of the people the hon. Gentleman employed were men or women is neither here nor there. If, in putting together his pension package, he made provision for people to inherit only the pension of a spouse, rather than the pension of a civil partner or a person of the same gender, he would have been advancing a prejudice.

Mr Nuttall: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. I believe that it should be up to the pension-holder to determine to whom their pension should go; it should not be anyone else's decision. No question of prejudice should arise, as it should be up to the individual to determine. I do not see that there is anything wrong with that. It is perfectly all right, and it does not need any legislation to allow that to happen.

Chris Bryant: But it has needed legislation to make sure that the vast majority of company pensions operate in that way. Of course the hon. Gentleman is right to say that it should be for the individual to decide to whom their pension goes, but in the vast majority of cases, the old assumption was that it went only to a spouse, and not to anyone else. It required legislation to change that.

Mr Nuttall: That is a slightly different point. The hon. Gentleman's point about pensions could easily have been dealt with by the individuals concerned dealing with the trustees of the pension scheme, and explaining to them that they wanted to change the rules of the scheme to allow their pension to go to a certain other individual. Of course, very often, there was no one forcing people to join the pension scheme; if they chose to join it, so be it. We now have a free market in pension schemes, so in the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes, there would have been a gap in the market and, in a free market, someone would have sprung up to provide pensions for people in exactly that position.

Chris Bryant: They did not.

Mr Nuttall: It could have happened.

My previous comments related to positive action. Positive discrimination, affirmative action or discrimination generally means choosing someone solely on the grounds of their gender or racial group, or for any other factor, and not for their ability. We are now at the crux of the matter. I believe that, by definition, as soon as one positively discriminates in respect of any given group in society, one is automatically discriminating against another group. That cannot be right. The Bill makes a good start in tackling the problem, but it is just the first step on the long road to ridding this country of the culture of political correctness and dismantling the whole industry of diversity and equality.

There could be no better time, given the economic situation, for that to gather pace. I know from my experience as a practising solicitor that many small and medium-sized enterprises struggle under the burden of the legislation. We are not there yet—there is a long way to go—but if we could begin to remove the legislation that applies to public authorities, that would be a step in the right direction. All our public services are looking for savings but, because of the way in which the law is framed, the one area in which they are not allowed to look for them is diversity and equality legislation. They have to keep their army of officers to comply with the law and the tick-box legislation.

Under the Disability Discrimination Acts, positive discrimination in favour of disabled people is not unlawful, and if disabled people meet the minimum criteria for a job, they are guaranteed an interview. The only other exemption relates to the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which the Bill seeks to abolish. The Equality Act 2010 includes a provision giving employers the option, when faced with two or more candidates of equal merit, of choosing one from a group that is under-represented in the work force. There is a whole Government Department—the Government Equalities Office—that exists solely for the purpose of issuing and enforcing guidance, red tape and regulations on that legislation. It has published guidance for employers on how to make those changes and use them in everyday life. The provisions on positive action in recruitment are, I am pleased to say, entirely voluntary but, as we all know, the public sector has seized on them with great glee. There is no requirement for an employer to use either the general provisions or those relating to recruitment and promotion.

Positive action in that regard will be used in cases in which an employer reasonably thinks that people with a protected characteristic are under-represented in the work force or suffer a disadvantage connected to that protected characteristic. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley made clear, the problem is where we draw the line. Why not, for example, protect and give help to those who are particularly tall?

Jacob Rees-Mogg: What an excellent idea—there should be special benefits for everyone over 6 feet.

Mr Nuttall: I am pleased that my hon. Friend is interested in this matter. If someone, for the sake of argument, is 7 feet tall—there are people of that stature in society—an employer might secretly think that they had better not take on such an employee, because they might complain about the size of the company's doorways and it would have to spend a fortune going round the building and enlarging all the doors. One can easily see how an argument could be made for heightist, stoutist or shortist legislation to be introduced—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sure doors matter to people who are over 2 metres—usually it is 6 feet 6 inches—but I cannot see the connection between the Bill and where we are being led, so I am sure the hon. Gentleman would like to bring us back now to the Bill.

Mr Nuttall: I will indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. The point I make is where do we draw the line? I will leave—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. To help the hon. Gentleman, I have drawn the line at doors.

Mr Nuttall: I entirely accept that, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I will leave that point there.

The new positive action provisions make it clear that employers must not adopt policies or practices designed routinely to favour candidates with a certain protected characteristic of whatever nature, even where there is evidence of under-representation or disadvantage. All suitably qualified candidates must be considered on their individual merits for the post in question. Current positive action provisions in employment relate only to training or encouragement—for example, mentoring schemes for ethnic minority staff where they are under-represented in senior roles, or open days to encourage women applicants in male-dominated sectors. This merely serves to upset and discriminate against all those who are not allowed to take part in such training. Why should they not receive the same training just because of their racial background, sex or particular individual characteristics?

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 was originally presented on 17 October 2001. The key objective of the Act was to enable a political party, should it wish to do so, to adopt measures that regulate the selection of candidates for certain elections in order to reduce inequality in the numbers of men and women as candidates in that party. In south Yorkshire in the 1980s I was regularly involved in the selection of parliamentary candidates. Of, say, 50 applications that we would typically receive for a seat, there would be on average 45 from men, three from women and two from ethnic minority candidates. It follows, therefore, that with 90% of the applications being from white males, very often a male was selected, but we were selecting purely on merit.

There were many examples, and there continue to be many examples in the Conservative party, of women who have succeeded on their merits. I know from Mrs Nuttall that she feels extremely patronised whenever there is any talk of special treatment being given to women.

Chris Bryant: By you?

Mr Nuttall: Mrs Nuttall does not mind special treatment of her from me—I think she expects it—but as a general rule that reflects the view of many women. If they are given special treatment, they feel that they are being patronised and that they can make it on their own merit without it. That applies equally to those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Many Members of this House have made it on their own strength without special treatment.

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. Given the changes that his leader has instituted in his party, is he saying that there are Members on the Conservative Benches—women or members of ethnic minorities—who have not got here purely on merit?

Mr Nuttall: I am not saying that at all. There is a risk that others might regard the winner from an all-women shortlist as not having succeeded against the whole field of candidates, which is self-evidently true.

Mr Campbell: Is that the hon. Gentleman's view? If so, would he care to name any of them?

Mr Nuttall: As far as I am concerned, all Members on the Government side of the House have got here on merit, but there are plenty of Members who succeeded in their applications as a direct result of the all-women shortlists that the Labour party introduced.

Mr Campbell: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the changes instituted by his leader to try to make his party more representative have been a waste of time?

Mr Nuttall: I believe that all selections should be open to all candidates, regardless of their race, sexual gender or any other merits, that political parties, wherever they are in the country, should be free to choose who they want on merit and that the 2002 Act should be repealed, which the Bill seeks to do. The key objective of that Act was to enable a political party, if it so wished, to adopt measures to regulate the selection of candidates, but I do not believe that that is the right way forward. According to the explanatory notes that accompanied the Act, in the 1996 case of Jepson *v.* the Labour party an employment tribunal held that section 13 of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 covered the selection of candidates by political parties, which therefore constrained their ability to take positive action to increase the number of women elected to this House.

Damian Green: For the avoidance of doubt, given the interventions from the Opposition, I am happy to confirm that the Conservative party has never used all-women shortlists and that they fell into disrepair in the Labour party after an all-women shortlist produced a male candidate who happened to be the leader of a trade union.

Mr Nuttall: I am most grateful to the Minister for that intervention. The Opposition say that they support all-women shortlists, but as Members on both sides of the House will be aware, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) was selected as a candidate despite his gender. It is perhaps one of the biggest ironies that he was selected even though his wife, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), seems so keen to have all-women shortlists in all constituencies.

Philip Davies: Is it not also ironic that the Labour party has brought in all these massively talented women, apparently, through the use of all-women shortlists, but when it wanted to select a new leader it seemed to bypass all that talent that had been brought into the House and plumped for a man?

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and perhaps the Labour party will consider selecting its leader on a rotational basis, with a male leader being followed by a female. As far as I am aware, the Labour party, unlike our party, has never had a female leader; perhaps it is time for half a dozen consecutive female leaders.

Chris Bryant: We have actually had two women leaders: my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) was briefly leader after John Smith died; and we had an interim leader in the form of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the current deputy leader. More to the point, however, considering the trump card to which the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) referred—Baroness Thatcher—is it not surprising that not a single other woman has chosen to stand for the leadership of the Conservative party since?

Mr Nuttall: That is not surprising; it is just a matter of fact. The two examples to which the hon. Gentleman refers from the Labour party were of course simply temporary leaders, who held the post until they could be replaced by a man. We should read nothing into the fact that, since the great lady ceased to be leader of our party, we have not produced a further female applicant for the leadership. I am sure that in years to come females will apply and be candidates in such elections.

Chris Bryant: I do apologise; I misled the House. Ann Widdecombe stood, but she was voted off quite fast—as she was off "Strictly".

Mr Nuttall: I will leave that there. We do not want to go into "Strictly Come Dancing". I will not be tempted down that road.

It has been suggested that the most effective way to attract female parliamentary candidates is to introduce a new system of flexible parental leave, so that aspiring female politicians do not have to choose between a career and family life. But, as we know from experience, Margaret Thatcher entered Parliament when her two children, Carol and Mark, were just six years old. That did not put off Margaret Thatcher, and there is no reason why it should put off anyone else some 50 years later.

Those who consider putting themselves forward to become a Member of Parliament have to make a choice, as we all do, men or women, and it would be sexist if that choice did not apply to men, too. Hon. Members, surely on both sides of the House, recognise that participating in running our country is no ordinary job.

What started in the 2002 Act as a temporary measure that would last only until 2015 has been extended by an enormous 15 years, so the use of all-women shortlists will be permitted right up to 2030. It has been suggested that this debate provides a suitable opportunity for the House to consider whether all-women shortlists have been effective, and perhaps it is time for us to do so. They have produced women MPs, but that is quite obvious. What we do not know is how many good male candidates have been prevented from getting to this House as a result of the application of the Act.

The Leader of the Opposition, on the subject of all-women shortlists, recently said:

> "People were sceptical about all-women shortlists but I think they have actually made an enormous difference to the numbers of women in Parliament."

If that is not a statement of the blindingly obvious, I do not know what is. If all-women shortlists are employed, by definition that can have no other effect than to produce more women candidates and, if applied across the board, that would inevitably lead to an increase in the number of women MPs. That is hardly a great achievement to cite.

It has also been suggested that we need to take action to increase female representation on boards of companies, but it should be up to companies themselves to determine whom they have on their boards. I have no reason to believe that they do not choose the best person for the job. I read the other day that there has been an enormous increase in the number of women directors in the City of London. However, the percentage of the total has hardly increased at all, because what tends to happen is that companies appoint female directors to tick a box. We have almost reached "token woman syndrome" again.

The positive action in recruitment provisions in the Equality Act 2010 are entirely voluntary. There is no requirement for an employer to use either the general provisions or those relating to recruitment and promotion. I may not want to see any legislation to ban discrimination, but equally I would not wish to legislate to encourage discrimination. The Bill would even things up. It is not clear that we have seen any improvement in how companies operate, but at a time of increased difficulty for public spending we have to look at ways of cutting back, and pruning the whole area of equality and diversity legislation would be a good starting point.

Mention was made earlier of the "Not In My Name" section of the Campaign Against Political Correctness website, and I have one or two other quotes from people who do not feel that the whole equality industry has helped them. Mark Grohen said:

> "As a gay man I've always thought myself rather lucky...I do not need to be told by politicians and do-gooders that I'm either vulnerable or incapable of looking after myself. I really dislike people's obsession with what I do in the bedroom: I prefer it not to be the reason why I'm hired for a job."

Chris Bryant: But unfortunately people are still murdered for their sexuality, as happened in public only a couple of years ago in Trafalgar square. That is why we need to ensure that the police services ensure that everyone is protected, not just the mainstream and the majority.

Mr Nuttall: The shadow Minister makes a perfectly valid point. I entirely agree that the police have to protect everyone equally, regardless of the colour of their skin, whether they are gay or straight, wherever they come from in the world, male or female. However, the existence of all the equality and diversity legislation runs the risk of upsetting those sections of society who feel alienated and discriminated against by that legislation. It does not help—in fact, it is counter-productive—for the Act to remain in place.

A lady—a female—who is half Chinese, said:

> "For those of us who have pursued equality for so many years, it is disheartening to see how little has been achieved. Equality is not political correctness. In a truly equal country, the best candidate gets the job even if it is the Anglo-Saxon chap. There is a still long way to go."

Paolo Fragale, who is a gay man of mixed race, said:

> "As a gay man of mixed race I vehemently oppose positive discrimination and quotas. Apart from the fact that I find them patronising, I feel they are counter productive and only serve to further segregate people."

Rachel Watts summed up the feeling of many women when she said:

> "The majority of women in favour of 'helping hands' and special treatment are the ones who will gain the most from them."

Perhaps the most difficult and sensitive area is those who are disabled. Frederick Bird said:

> "As someone registered disabled, I would not object to not being given a job that I was not able to do due to my disability. Being realistic there are things that I cannot do and no p.c. rubbish can alter the fact."

Mention was made earlier of the help that disabled people need. I am pleased to say that the Government, under the Work programme, are dealing with this as it should be dealt with—on an individual basis. It is simply not right to write off great sections of the community, whether they are blind or disabled in any other way, and say, "I'm sorry—you're not able to work because of your disability." We should do all we can for those who have a disability to give them tailored, specialised, individual help to get them back into the workplace, but that cause will not be helped by some artificial means of employing quotas.

My final quote comes from Denise O'Brien, a disabled female person who is also a lesbian. She said:

> "Political correctness is making artificial differences between people unnecessarily. Special treatment for minority groups in a lot of cases breeds resentment from those not included who have genuine need of help."

The Bill is a good start on a very long road that we have to go down. It perhaps says something about where we are with the equality and diversity agenda that in the recently published new edition of "The Solicitor's Handbook", chapter 2 is on equality and diversity, and it comes before the chapters on client confidentiality and conflicts of interest. I am sure that when someone goes to consult their solicitor they are more interested to know that their business is being dealt with confidentially and that there is no conflict of interest than whether the company in question has the right sort of tick-box approach to equality and diversity. This is a burden on small and medium-sized enterprises. It is no business of the Government to interfere in this way in how businesses are run. It provides an unnecessary burden in terms of the training that they have to do on a yearly basis in order to be able to demonstrate that they are complying with the diversity agenda.

In conclusion, this matter is perhaps best summed up by the quotation from George Orwell's "Animal Farm":

> "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others."

It cannot be right that we need this legislation in the 21st century. Everybody should be treated with respect and tolerance. I have no objection to using the word tolerance. If it is used in its normal, everyday meaning, everybody knows that it means tolerating people and treating people from different backgrounds with respect. By starting along the road of removing some of the politically correct nonsense legislation, we would be doing our constituents a great service. I warmly commend the Bill to the House. I trust that it will receive resounding support on Second Reading, have a smooth passage through this House and the other place, and reach the statute book, much to the delight of my constituents.

12.35 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): This debate has been even more educational, informative and entertaining than I had hoped and expected when I learned that I would be responding to it. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for the absence of my hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities, who is a greater expert on these matters than I am.

This debate has stimulated a discussion on the use of positive action in our society, particularly by public authorities and political parties. It provides me with an opportunity to explain the principles and the practice of positive action as it is used by the Government, and to clarify how it can be lawfully and helpfully used in different situations by public and private organisations, service providers, and political parties, which are specifically raised in the Bill.

I will start by correcting two small errors that have crept into the debate. First, my hon. Friend said that no one cares about any form of apparent discrimination against men. He raised the interesting and relevant subject of midwives. However, there is currently a debate about the paucity of male teachers in primary schools and that is a serious issue. I am sure that many hon. Members from all parts of the House have had the experience that I have had of going into a small primary school in their constituency and finding themselves the only adult male on the premises apart, usually, from the caretaker. We all recognise that that does not necessarily contribute to the quality of education. My colleagues in the Department for Education are concerned about this issue. It gets to the nub of the debate, because if a head teacher in such a primary school were faced with two candidates of equal merit, one of whom was male and one female, a lot of us would think it sensible for them to pick the male candidate. No doubt, the female candidate would feel that that was unfair and unnecessary discrimination, but in many ways it would be common sense.

The second correction is, again, purely factual.

Chris Bryant *rose—*

Damian Green: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman before correcting one of the mistakes that he made.

Chris Bryant: I thought that the Minister might be about to do that.

I remember on one occasion a bishop saying to me that he was very worried because he had to appoint a clergyman in a deanery where all the clergy were gay, and he thought that it might be discriminatory if he did not appoint a gay vicar to the parish just because all the other vicars were gay.

Damian Green: I think that it would be foolish to enter into Church politics in that way from this Dispatch Box, so I will merely note what the hon. Gentleman has said. I wanted to correct him on a point that was perhaps not central to his argument. In referring to my

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former neighbouring MP for Maidstone and the Weald, Ann Widdecombe, he said that she had been voted off "Strictly" very early. That is not true. She went a very long way in "Strictly", and indeed the BBC was panicking that she was going to win.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Not being an entrant of "Strictly", I can be strictly authoritarian on this—we are going to stick to the Bill.

Chris Bryant: And I didn't say that.

Damian Green: You did. I will very happily return to the Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The aim of the Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley is to prohibit the use of positive action by public authorities in recruitment and appointment processes, and to repeal the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002. I shall start with the principles behind what the Government do.

Our approach to equality is built on two principles—equal treatment and equality of opportunity. I entirely share my hon. Friend's dislike of equality of outcome as a political project. He said that it was misguided, and I certainly agree. However, the Government's approach is built on the principles of equality of opportunity and equal treatment. That means building a society in which no one is held back because of who they are or where they come from. It means not uniformity but, rather, giving everyone an equal right to be treated fairly as an individual.

In our society, people can face discrimination and disadvantage because of who they are and where they come from. The Government need specific action to deal with such problems. However, the key to taking forward our equality strategy is to demonstrate that equality is for everyone by making it a part of everyday life. It is about changing culture and attitudes and tackling the causes of inequality rather than introducing more legislation. That is why we are working with business, local communities and citizens to promote good practice, transparency and accountability.

We can look at the history and concept of positive action. It is, of course, not new in UK legislation. The general positive action provisions have been in use for more than 30 years, having first been introduced in the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Race Relations Act 1976. Those provisions, which are sometimes called the training and encouragement provisions, have ever since allowed employers, both public and private sector, to take a range of voluntary—I cannot emphasise that word strongly enough—positive action measures to address disadvantage and under-representation in the work force.

There are many examples of such training and encouragement measures by employers, including the provision of mentoring and shadowing opportunities, the targeting of advertisements at particular groups by encouraging them to apply for advertised jobs, and the holding of open days solely for people with a particular protected characteristic that is under-represented in the workplace, in order to offer them an insight into the selection process that they would have to go through when applying for employment with that employer.

Over the decades since those provisions were first introduced, they have become both well understood and well used. The Equality Act 2010 simplifies and harmonises them, so that unlike previous legislation, under which positive action applied in slightly different ways to different protected characteristics, it now applies in the same way to all of them as long as the relevant criteria for their use are adequately met. For those who are confused by the jargon, a reference to "protected characteristics" means a reference to someone's age, disability, marital or civil partnership status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation or gender reassignment if applicable. What is new under the 2010 Act is that it extends positive action provisions to the limits permissible under EU directives, which allow member states to adopt specific measures to prevent or compensate for disadvantages linked to any of those protected characteristics. It introduces new provisions specifically related to recruitment and promotion, not recruitment and appointment as suggested in my hon. Friend's Bill. He is slightly off the mark with that.

There is a real need to tackle under-representation and ensure that everyone takes part in key areas of our society, in civil, economic and political life. One could cite a range of statistics to show why positive action can be helpful in tackling the under-representation and disadvantage that are suffered across the board in some of the more desirable strata in our society. For example, there are only three ethnic minority High Court judges. There was much discussion this morning about the composition of Parliament and how the political parties approach it. Only 22% of MPs are women, but more than half the population are women, so that is a huge disparity. More widely, only one third of public appointments are held by women, and only 0.8% of local councillors in England are black and minority ethnic women, which is an extraordinarily low figure. In terms of active discrimination, one in five lesbian, gay and bisexual people say that they have been harassed at work because of their sexual orientation. Although progress has been made—*[Interruption.]* I will not respond to that sedentary intervention from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the shadow Minister, for his sake. Although progress has been made, clearly more needs to be made in future.

Positive action can also be used to support the delivery of the equality duty, which requires public authorities to consider the needs of people with various protected characteristics, some of whom may be at a considerable disadvantage. In a bid to address such needs, public bodies could choose—I emphasise choose—to use the positive action measures to target those disadvantaged groups.

Before I respond further to my hon. Friend's Bill, it might be useful to set out what positive action is, what it can be used for, how it can be legally used in different scenarios, and most importantly, what it is not. In this morning's interesting debate, many hon. Members were sliding between attacks on specific legislation and examples of positive action, and a general dislike of political correctness. There is an interesting and genuine debate to be had both on the meaning of political correctness and on what it has meant in practice, and we could ask whether it has gone too far in some ways and not far enough in others, but that does not have much to do with my hon. Friend's Bill—I will therefore stick to the terms of the Bill.

Positive action is a term used to describe a range of measures that organisations can use when people who share a protected characteristic—I have listed them—experience some form of disadvantage because of that characteristic; have particular needs linked to that characteristic; or are disproportionately under-represented in a particular activity. In the second scenario, the Bill would make it illegal for people to install a wheelchair ramp, because that would be positive action to help a particular group. I do not believe that my hon. Friend intends that, but as I understand it, that would be the effect of one of the clauses. It is important to look at the detail of what positive action can involve when we assess whether the Bill should make further progress.

When any of the three conditions apply, proportionate action can be taken to overcome that disadvantage—I again emphasise that the action must be proportionate, and that action "can" rather than "must" be taken. Action can be taken to overcome a disadvantage, to meet particular needs, or to encourage and increase participation in the related activity.

Positive action can be taken in relation to a wide range of activities covered by the Act as well as employment, such as education, training, service delivery and activities undertaken by associations and other organisations. Positive action is not about woolly-minded thinking, political correctness, reverse discrimination or sidelining men. My hon. Friend was both entertaining and in large part correct in attacking what he described as lentil eating, woolly minded, *Guardian* reading characteristics.

Chris Bryant: That's you in the Tory party.

Damian Green: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that I really do not eat lentils—nor do I own a pair of sandals, nor do I for pleasure read most of *The Guardian*. I find *The Guardian* extremely useful for one thing. If I ever wake up and feel my political energy flagging, I read the letters page of *The Guardian* and that reminds me why I am a Conservative and why there needs to be a Conservative Government in this country—if only to keep people such as that out of power. So *The Guardian* serves a tremendously useful purpose in my life.

Positive action is about counteracting the effects of historical discrimination and disadvantage by providing opportunities for those who are disadvantaged or under-represented to gain skills that would enable them to compete fairly and openly for jobs and to reach their potential. There are practical benefits for businesses attached to the use of those measures and I shall return to them later. However, I very much take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall); we need to consider the needs of businesses, particularly small and medium-sized ones, although as I say there are the practical benefits.

A common misconception confuses positive action and positive discrimination; some people talk about the two interchangeably. It is important to establish that there is a clear distinction between them. Positive discrimination is treatment that favours a person solely because they have a particular protected characteristic, irrespective of whether there are special circumstances. In other words, the treatment discriminates in their favour whether or not they experience a disadvantage connected to that protected characteristic or have particular needs that are different from those of people without that protected characteristic.

Positive discrimination is generally unlawful in this country and will remain unlawful in most cases, although we should note that it is not unlawful to give more favourable treatment to a disabled person than to a non-disabled person. The intention behind that is to provide a level playing field for disabled people, who have been widely recognised to be disadvantaged in the field of employment, in society and in accessing services, without being open to legal challenge by non-disabled people.

Positive action, as I outlined, is about ensuring that any action taken has to be a proportionate means of achieving the aim of tackling or addressing disadvantage, encouraging participation in activities and meeting the specific needs of people with protected characteristics. It is essential for any organisation using positive action to ensure that the measures being taken do not unlawfully discriminate against people outside the group that they are seeking to help. The provisions in the Equality Act 2010 that relate to positive action make that very clear.

I am sure that my hon. Friends who have spoken in favour of the Bill would agree that many in our society have experienced historical disadvantage and under-representation in numerous sectors and professions, including in economic and political life, and many still do. Of course, significant progress has been made in recent decades to improve things.

Philip Davies: No doubt what my hon. Friend said about historical disadvantage is true, but does he think that just because black people, for example, have been discriminated against in the past, white people should be discriminated against now as some kind of reparation? Channel 4 has training courses that are open only for people from ethnic minorities. Why should somebody who happens to be from a white working class background and wants to get into the industry be deprived of doing so just because of discrimination that took place in the past?

Damian Green: I return to the point I have been making for the past couple of minutes about the distinction between positive action and positive discrimination. Specifically on the training courses my hon. Friend mentions, if a job were open only to people with a particular characteristic, that would be discrimination and would be unlawful. However, saying that one is finding it very difficult to attract a particular group of people even to think about applying for a job, and perhaps having an open day or some training aimed specifically at those people is positive action. At the relevant point—at the point of offering a job—everyone should be treated equally and there should not be any discrimination. Positive action is about trying to ensure that nobody is excluded from operating on their own merits or from applying for a particular job or position.

There was a debate a few minutes ago about the different measures used by different political parties in attempting to encourage more women to come into the House of Commons. I think there was a very neat dichotomy in that the Conservative party adopted measures short of all-women shortlists such as encouraging, mentoring and training, which resulted in a large number of new women colleagues for my hon. Friend and I in this Parliament, which we both welcome. The Conservatives did not go down the very crude route of the all-women shortlist that the Labour party introduced in the late 1990s, so there are different ways of achieving what is a

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desirable thing—equality of opportunity. Some ways are discriminatory and some are not, and the Government's policy seeks to ensure that we maintain that very important distinction and continue to have positive action so that everyone can be treated equally, but that we do not inadvertently fall into the trap that my hon. Friend rightly warns us about of discriminating against those who do not have the particular protected characteristics. In many ways, that is at the heart of the debate: we need to maintain that distinction.

One of the Government's aims is to speed up the rate of progress in achieving gender equality in various sectors, particularly by promoting gender equality on the boards of listed companies and by increasing female representation in politics. Progress on those fronts can be attained using the wide range of measures that are available to companies and other institutions under positive action. My hon. Friend and others will have heard the Prime Minister recently acknowledge in the House that the use of positive action is necessary on occasions to redress gender disparities in boardrooms and in politics.

In any case, lest we forget and think that using positive action places huge regulatory or financial burdens on bodies—my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North made that point—the use of any positive action measure is entirely voluntary and there is no mandatory requirement for any organisation to use positive action. If an organisation thinks there will be no real benefits to it from taking positive action measures, it does not have to do so. The voluntary nature of positive action means there are no associated mandatory burdens on organisations if they do not take such measures. That point is significant but is often missed in these debates.

Before I address the use of positive action in matters of recruitment and promotion, I should like to draw the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley to clause 2 of his Bill, which would make it unlawful to use positive action for any of the listed protected characteristics as well as for socio-economic status. The current positive action provisions do not permit measures to be taken to address issues solely relating to socio-economic inequality. He might be aware that the Government were not persuaded by the arguments for a public sector duty relating to socio-economic inequalities in the 2010 Act and that they have already decided not to commence those provisions, which will be repealed at a future date. I hope that he and I can agree on that point if on no other.

I turn specifically to the effect of the Bill, the aim of which is to prohibit the use of positive action by public authorities in recruitment and appointment processes. The Bill would, as drafted, create a two-tier system under which it would be lawful for private organisations to continue to use positive action measures in recruitment and appointment processes, but not for public authorities. That would mean that public authorities would not have the same benefits of opportunity open to them in recruitment as private sector organisations. Not only does this disparity seem unfair, but it could be confusing for employers, especially private organisations that deliver services under contract to or on behalf of a public authority, but which may not normally be considered public authorities themselves.

I make it clear that the provisions in the Equality Act 2010 contain explicit built-in safeguards to ensure that they are not misused. The provisions allow the use of positive action specifically in the process of recruitment and promotion in limited circumstances. Positive action can therefore only be used in the process of recruitment and promotion for specific purposes: to overcome or minimise a disadvantage, or to increase participation in activities, or where the candidates are as qualified as each other to carry out the job under consideration, or where the action is a proportionate means of addressing the particular disadvantage or under-representation, and where the employer does not have an automatic policy of treating people who share a protected characteristic more favourably than those who do not have protected characteristics.

To help employers who want to use positive action to do so lawfully, a step-by-step practical guide to using positive action when making appointments is available on the Government Equalities Office website. It will help an employer to ask all the relevant questions and ensure transparency at every stage of the recruitment and appointment process.

Remedies are available to possible victims of positive action. Any participant who deems that the positive action measures used by an organisation in its recruitment and promotion process have not been fair to them, or a person who believes they have been deterred from taking part in such a process, could bring a claim against the organisation. It would ultimately be up to any employer using positive action in recruitment to ensure that the assessment process is proportionate to achieving the aim of addressing a disadvantage or under-representation, that it is transparent and that they can sufficiently justify how they make a choice between candidates.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the principle of merit should always apply in any recruitment or promotion process that uses positive action measures. As I have already said, under these measures, a person cannot be appointed solely because they possess a certain protected characteristic that is disadvantaged or under-represented in the workplace. That would constitute unlawful discrimination.

An employer faced with making a choice between two or more candidates who are as qualified as each other to undertake the post in question can take into consideration whether any of the candidates possesses a protected characteristic that is disadvantaged or disproportionately under-represented in the work force. However, this does not mean that the candidates under consideration have to be identical in every respect. Any consideration of merit should take into account the relevant facts of their competence, ability, experience and any formal qualifications that may be relevant to the particular job.

Among other things, the Bill would put a stop to the setting and pursuit of targets in relation to recruitment and promotion. Targets are not quotas, nor are they the same as positive action. Targets are the end that an organisation wishes to achieve, while positive action is, essentially, the measures that an organisation can take in order to achieve its aim. Targets allow organisations to direct a range of programmes, initiatives, products and services at particular groups of people who are under-represented in certain activities, or because of poor take-up of services or activities. Such action would enable these groups to acquire the necessary skills to compete for jobs or to access services tailored to their specific needs. It is perfectly permissible in the UK to set targets that are intended to provide an incentive for people to improve and achieve certain goals.

Of course, targets are not limitless; they either evolve as an organisation's priorities change over the years, or they come to their natural end. I think there is a fear that this is an endless path going in one direction. Clearly, an organisation may decide that it has done what it needs to do to meet a target that it has set itself for representation within its work force, or its boardroom, or its parliamentary party or whatever, and at that point the existing legislative framework entirely permits the organisation to get off the track and continue its normal business as it would have done if it had never introduced those measures.

As I mentioned, an important priority for the Government is to increase the number of women in the boardroom and in civic and public life. The key to achieving that is not through the setting of strict employment quotas such as reserving a number of posts only for women, which would in any case be unlawful—I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley and the House that the Government have absolutely no intention of changing that position—but through the use of voluntary measures and initiatives.

The difference between the targets that I have been talking about and the quotas that my hon. Friend is rightly sceptical about is that the target can be worked towards naturally over a period spent developing people in order that the organisation can hit the target, whereas a quota must be filled whether or not there are suitable people available to fill it. That is the absolutely crucial practical distinction. If we tried to force organisations to fill quotas, less qualified people would be appointed to positions, which would be unfair on those who were better qualified, and in the long term damaging for the institution concerned. If the legislation currently in place had that effect, or indeed that intention, I would share all my hon. Friend's worries about it, but it does not, and just as the distinction between positive discrimination and positive action is key, the difference between targets and quotas is absolutely key. We have a sensible, practical set of measures that can allows organisations to improve themselves, not something that is over-burdensome.

Philip Davies: I am interested in what the Minister has to say. Will he clarify this point? I understood from what I have read in the media—I concede that one should not always believe everything one reads in the papers—that the Government have let it be known that if boardrooms do not hit the target set by Lord Davies, if they do not go themselves voluntarily to hit that target, the Government will act. Can the Minister assure the House now that if they do not hit the artificial, arbitrary targets that Lord Davies set in his report, the Government will not act?

Damian Green: I do not accept that the targets are necessarily arbitrary or artificial. We are very keen that organisations should hit their targets for women in boardrooms; the Government strongly welcomed the Lord Davies report and we are now at the stage of working with business and others to ensure that the recommendations are implemented effectively without recourse to some of the measures that my hon. Friend would regard as draconian.

I am happy to report to the House that good progress has been made in implementing the recommendations. In May, the Financial Reporting Council launched its consultation on changes to the UK corporate governance code. The headhunting industry has agreed a voluntary code on diversity, which was launched in July 2011. The Association of Executive Search Consultants will champion the code to its members, and there is an increasing and strong sense of ownership and action in FTSE 100 businesses, including company secretaries, who will in many cases be the key figure in the organisation.

Philip Davies: I really must press the Minister on this, because some things are more voluntary than others. If the Government say to organisations, "This is what we expect of you; if you don't do it, we will force you to do it," and the Government then start reporting progress, that is not voluntary—at least not in my eyes. It is a very curious definition of "voluntary". If businesses do not hit the artificial target in Lord Davies's report, will the Government act? From what the Minister says, it sounds as if the Government will not act and force businesses to take action if they do not do so themselves.

Damian Green: What I am saying is that the bodies are already acting themselves, so the undesirable outcome of which my hon. Friend is fearful will not happen. I have talked about various organisations; let me mention specific companies. Centrica, BT and Barclays have all provided programmes or initiatives to assist in the recruitment, retention, development and advancement of women and persons from other protected groups in the workplace, and to broaden their career aspirations. That makes the point that I alluded to earlier: good and constructive use of positive action is not woolly-minded, or political correctness gone mad, or whatever the cliché du jour is; it has practical benefits for the organisations that voluntarily opt for it.

I refer my hon. Friend to a report published in 2008 by the CBI, the TUC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission entitled "Talent not Tokenism: the business benefits of workforce diversity". It showed that diversity in an organisation promotes productivity and efficiency, and increases market opportunities. Several UK employers recognise the benefits of positive action; it fills skill gaps while generating a more diverse work force. That added diversity in turn gives employers a better understanding of customers' needs, opening up new markets and attracting new business.

More businesses than ever, including FTSE companies at all levels—those in the FTSE 100, FTSE 250 and FTSE 350—are using voluntary positive action measures to improve the diversity of their top management and boards of executive and non-executive directors. Lord Davies's report, to which my hon. Friend referred, acknowledged that corporate boards perform better when they comprise experienced people with a greater range of skills, perspectives and backgrounds. His report indicated that there is a business case for increasing the diversity of corporate boards, and especially for gender-diverse boards, so that businesses can draw on the full range of available talent and achieve effective governance and performance.

[Damian Green]

To address my hon. Friend's point directly, Lord Davies's report ruled out the setting of mandatory quotas to compel businesses to appoint female directors to their boards, so my hon. Friend is right not to believe everything that he reads in the media. The statistics are stark. The proportion of women on FTSE 100 company boards is 14.2%, and the figure is 8.9% for FTSE 250 companies. Previously, almost half the FTSE 250 companies had no women director on their board. A recently published report by the Cranfield School of Management on the progress made on some of the recommendations outlined in the Davies report shows that, for the first time, a minority of FTSE 250 companies have all-male boards. Moving down the size scale, FTSE 350 companies face an even greater challenge in increasing female representation on their boards.

My hon. Friend may have heard of the 30% Club, which comprises a group of UK company chairmen, if I am allowed to use that word, who are voluntarily committed to bringing more women on to UK corporate boards. The 30% Club supports a voluntary target to ensure that every UK corporate board has at least 30% female representation by 2015.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I think that the Minister is going slightly wider than the Bill, so could he perhaps drag it back to public authorities?

Damian Green: I shall certainly drag it back to public authorities, and indeed specifically to the proposal by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley to repeal the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, in which I know you have a particular interest, Mr Deputy Speaker. The effect of the Bill would not be what I think my hon. Friend intends, because the majority of that Act has already been repealed by the Equality Act 2010. I urge him to look at schedule 27 of that Act—the repeals and revocations schedule—which repeals most of the Act that he seeks to repeal. The 2002 Act has largely been repealed because the provisions relating to elections in England, Scotland and Wales are now contained in the Equality Act 2010. Repealing what remains extant of the 2002 Act would not achieve what I assume to be the aim of the Bill, as the provisions relating to the selection of election candidates would continue to be permissible for registered political parties in Scotland, England and Wales if they chose to use them.

What remain extant of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act are provisions that relate solely to Northern Ireland. The 2002 Act amends the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, permitting political parties to adopt single-sex shortlists when selecting candidates for elections to certain bodies. Repealing the 2002 Act would only create further confusion and disparity, as the provisions relating to electoral shortlists could continue to be used in England, Scotland and Wales, but not in Northern Ireland.

In any case, we consider that the provisions relating to the selection of election candidates remain a legitimate tool for parties that wish to use them. The provisions enable registered political parties to take action to address any disparity in their representation of men and women in elected office, including the use of women-only shortlists. We have had a great deal of discussion about the under-representation of women elected to the House—only 144 of 650 Members are women, equating to about 22% of MPs—and it is widely agreed across the House that although progress has been made, it is not yet complete and there is a need for political parties to make the House more representative of the diverse population in this country, because that will enable us to deliver better governance.

I should point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley and to the House as a whole that the use of those provisions is time-limited, as they are due to expire in 2030 when, we hope, the representation of women in political or other elected office will have increased significantly. The provisions do, however, contain a power to allow a Minister to extend their use beyond 2030 if insufficient progress has been made in increasing female representation. Given the fact that we have given ourselves two decades to achieve that aim, I hope that we can do so without requiring that extension.

By attempting to prevent the use of positive action under what I hope I have persuaded hon. Members are entirely appropriate circumstances, the aims of the Bill contradict Government policy to promote fairness, equality and diversity and to tackle under-representation in targeted areas such as "women on company boards" and "elected office". Many public authorities have long used forms of positive action in relation to matters connected to recruitment and promotion, and they strongly support the continued use of those provisions. Some registered political parties have successfully used these measures in recent years and, as far as I am aware, there is no opposition from any of the major political parties to using positive action to redress gender representation.

The key thing to remember is that the use of any form of positive action in our country is entirely voluntary, whether it is in providing services, in employment-related matters, in increasing participation in particular activities, or in politics. Organisations will use the provisions only if there is a real benefit for them in doing so. Without the use of positive action, it would not be possible to develop the initiatives outlined in the coalition programme for government to tackle the numerous barriers to social mobility and equal opportunities that exist in our society in relation to age, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation. It is not possible to build a fairer society without being able to take the necessary measures to end discrimination in the workplace; to promote gender equality on the boards of listed companies; to promote improved community relations and opportunities for people of black and minority ethnic backgrounds; to provide internships for under-represented groups; and to fund targeted mentoring schemes to help under-represented groups to start businesses. It is clear that my hon. Friend's Bill would remove this voluntary but important opportunity for organisations and political parties to make strides in tackling the continued disadvantage and under-representation experienced by persons with protected characteristics in work forces and in civic, public and political life across the UK. To stop the use of positive action would cause a major setback in the progress already made in addressing disadvantage or under-representation in our society. I therefore urge my hon. Friend to withdraw his Bill.

1.20 pm

Philip Davies: With the leave of the House, may I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate, those who supported my Bill—I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) and for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg) for their typically robust comments on my behalf—and those who contributed to the debate even though they did not agree with me?

It is sad that in this age it is so difficult to persuade Members of the merits of the principle that people should be given jobs on merit, and merit alone. It is like pushing water uphill to try and make the case for that basic and, I should have thought, obvious proposition. On that note I shall conclude the debate and press the motion to a Division.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 3, Noes 39.

Division No. 371] **[1.21 pm**

AYES

Bone, Mr Peter
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Rees-Mogg, Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:
Philip Davies and
Mr David Nuttall

NOES

Ali, Rushanara
Austin, Ian
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Blunt, Mr Crispin
Bryant, Chris
Campbell, Mr Alan
Creagh, Mary
David, Mr Wayne
Eagle, Ms Angela
Fallon, Michael
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freer, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gauke, Mr David
Gilbert, Stephen
Grayling, rh Chris
Greatrex, Tom
Green, Damian
Hamilton, Mr David
Hendry, Charles
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Glenda
Kawczynski, Daniel
Leslie, Chris
Loughton, Tim
Milton, Anne
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr Stephen
Paice, rh Mr James
Penrose, John
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Sanders, Mr Adrian
Seabeck, Alison
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Willetts, rh Mr David
Wright, Mr Iain
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Greg Hands and
Jeremy Wright

Question accordingly negatived.

Master's Degrees (Minimum Standards) Bill

Second Reading

1.35 pm

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill would resolve a straightforward question—should some universities have the right to award a free master's degree, while at every other university hundreds of thousands of students have to work hard to earn theirs? It is difficult to believe, but the practice of converting a bachelor's degree into a master's without exams, extra study or tuition fees still exists. Only some 3,000 lucky bachelor's degree graduates of only two universities—Oxford and Cambridge—are able to list an impressive-looking postgraduate qualification on their CVs each year, for nothing more than a £10 administration charge, and without even the £10 fee at Cambridge.

In what must rank as one of the most byzantine relics of a bygone era—other than private Member's Bill Fridays—these complimentary master of arts degrees require nothing more than a 21-term period to elapse after matriculation before these fortunate few graduates have their bachelor's degrees automatically upgraded. Neil Dodgson, a Cambridge professor, says that

> "many find it offensive that we should award a degree for doing nothing more than being able to breathe for three years."

In contrast, the vast majority of ordinary postgraduate students have to earn their degree the hard way, often paying a £4,500 or higher tuition fee, studying for a year or more, completing coursework, exams, dissertations, and so on. Many of those who earn their master's degrees are completely unaware that they could be competing for future employment with candidates declaring their MA(Oxon) or MA(Cantab) at the head of their CV. Is that really fair? Clearly not.

Eleven years ago, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education said:

> "The Masters title causes much misunderstanding...most employers think it always represents an award for postgraduate study".

A survey the agency conducted found that more than 60% of recruiters were unaware of the honorary nature of this so-called higher degree.

The time has come to end this anachronism, and a growing body of opinion believes it is time to draw a veil over these arrangements. I should state for the record that I do not blame anyone from Oxbridge for taking the opportunity presented to them—chance would be a fine thing. But if we set aside the cheeky sense of privilege, even the most battle-hardened defenders of elitism have to admit that the total and utter lack of merit behind this apparently great award is unfair. Indeed, it is now surely in the best interests of modern and open Oxford and Cambridge universities for them to voluntarily relinquish this privilege and prove that they are beacons of genuine learning and earned distinction.

I have written to both universities challenging them to reconsider voluntarily and phase out these arrangements without the need for legislation. Unfortunately, they are gambling that no one will disturb their long-standing privileges. But there is still time and I hope that the Minister will join me in urging Oxford and Cambridge to take seriously the palpable objections to these give-away

[Chris Leslie]

degrees. They undermine valid qualifications from other universities. They entrench an artificial distinction between students and higher education institutions. They confuse employers and create the risk that genuine achievements are misrepresented. They demoralise those who spend years of their lives to achieve something that others get for nothing. They risk devaluing the genuine calibre and reputation of British higher education. Some will argue that this is a harmless practice and that everyone knows that it is not really a masters degree. Unfortunately, however, not everyone is in the loop, and plenty of people will be hoodwinked by the free degree.

I could argue that one solution is to allow everyone with a bachelor's degree the same chance to get a free master's thrown in, but that would be daft. Instead, I propose a simple, and surely uncontentious Bill. It would require the Quality Assurance Agency to report within three months on the measures necessary to establish a minimum standard—a very minimum standard—of academic achievement for all master's degrees awarded by higher education institutions in England. Hon. Members may be surprised to learn that there are no basic or fundamental yardsticks of that sort to ensure academic rigour across the board, but sadly that is the case. A simple threshold would ensure that future postgraduate degrees are all awarded on the basis of the proven hard work of students who have undertaken a course of study. Basic standards and fair play should not be too much to ask. The time has come for us to end this unmerited and confusing patronage once and for all.

1.40 pm

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): As always, it is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie). I seem to recall that I was in the Chamber some months ago when his Bill was introduced by way of the ten-minute rule process, and as a consequence of that, we are here today debating its Second Reading. I am sure that he is pleased that it has reached this stage so swiftly.

In most United Kingdom universities, the MA—master's of arts—degree is a free-standing graduate degree awarded by examination. I should say at the outset that I approach this subject entirely without any prejudgment of the case, because I did not attend either Oxford or Cambridge, or, indeed, Dublin university. I did a rather unusual thing, in many ways. I think I am probably in a minority in the House in that I obtained my bachelor of law degree by correspondence through the university of London.

It had always been my intention to try to go university after I had completed my secondary education, and most people thought that that would happen, but in those days, 30 years ago—I hardly dare say it—the number of universities and the application process was rather different from today. One had to apply to various universities and was given grades that one had to achieve in order to meet the requirements of the course that one had applied for. I had applied for law degree courses, which usually came back with quite a high requirement in terms of the grades that had to be achieved in order to attend. In the event—it is a matter of record and widely known—I did not get the grades that I needed to be able to attend such a course.

Thirty years ago, much like today, the economic situation put unemployment high on the national agenda. It seemed to me that the purpose of education was to get a job. In the summer of 1980, I was therefore faced with a dilemma: did I sit around, unemployed, and hope for something to turn up, did I take an alternative further education course, or did I look for a job? As luck would have it, I got the job that I applied for as a trainee legal executive. I accept that I am very fortunate because I have applied for only one job in my life.

I make that point not to digress, but because it leads on to what happened a few days later. I was offered the opportunity to go to Hull university, not to do a law degree, but to do a degree in economics, philosophy and sociology, or some other three-study degree. I thought long and hard, and had many sleepless nights thinking about whether I should give up the job that I had just got and do a course that I did not really want to follow at university. I was told that it might be possible to swap courses, but I decided not to go to university in the conventional way, but to stay at the small firm of solicitors that I had joined. I was forced to continue my legal education at night school, studying in the evenings and at weekends. I started at Richmond college doing the trainee legal executive exams, as they were in those days, for the Institute of Legal Executives.

It was only after I had been doing those studies for a couple of years that I realised that if ever I was to achieve my long-term ambition of becoming a solicitor, I needed to obtain a law degree. In those days, it was far less common than it is today to obtain a law degree by correspondence. In a nutshell, it meant that one had to do the same exams to the same standard as everyone who had attended the university of London as an internal student, without the benefit—although some might think it a disadvantage—of living in London and attending the lectures. It required a degree of rigour and self-denial, because at evenings and weekends it was necessary to stay in when ones friends were going out and doing the things that 18 and 19-year-olds do. Actually, I was probably in my early 20s by the time I had started the degree. I had to persevere down that route.

Chris Leslie: I am very interested in the hon. Gentleman's personal history, but he will be aware that time is pressing and that the sitting finishes at 2.30. It would be useful to hear from the Minister and others on the specific issue of the integrity of the master's degree. I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman was swift with his remarks.

Mr Nuttall: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I will address that point in detail shortly. I just wanted to make the point that I am in no way biased about the merits or otherwise of someone having an MA from Oxford, Cambridge or Dublin after their name just because I did not go down that particular route. In fact, the first time I came across the practice—I had not known that such things were possible—was not until I was at the firm of solicitors that I mentioned. One of the partners who had joined after me had been to Cambridge, and he had a law degree. Upon paying whatever the requisite fee was, he became a master of arts. It was only through chatting with him at that time that I discovered the practice. I hope the House will therefore accept that my comments are made in the light of that background, and that I am completely neutral.

I understand that the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin award BA graduates MAs without postgraduate work after an allotted period. At the university of Dublin, those who have a bachelor of arts degree may proceed to the degree of master of arts after a period of three years and payment of a fee of €637.

I accept that concerns have been raised about the practice in previous years. They were perhaps first noted in the House back in 2000, when Jackie Lawrence, the Labour MP for Preseli Pembrokeshire, tabled an early-day motion. I understand that it was signed by more than 50 right hon. and hon. Members, and that it proposed, I believe for the first time, that the Oxbridge MA be phased out. In the same year, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education—the university standards watchdog, if I can call it that—reviewed the issue as part of its attempts to create a uniform system of master's degrees for employers in the United Kingdom and the rest of the world. One can well understand the need for some form of standardisation across the universities sector, so that employers know what they are dealing with.

The practice of what might be called the ancient universities—I think that is the correct term for Oxbridge—actually dates back to mediaeval times, when study for a liberal arts degree typically took seven years and the degree was awarded in two parts. The bachelor of arts degree was awarded at the end of undergraduate studies, then the master of arts degree was undertaken, which gave the student the licence to teach. Until the 17th century, the Oxbridge student completed the study of the BA and then usually remained at the institution for a further three years. As is the case today, the student became a full member of the university after being awarded the MA degree. I understand that that is one reason why most students take up the opportunity to move from a BA to an MA. I would be interested to know whether anyone has the precise statistics on that.

By the end of the 17th century, for reasons that are not known nowadays, the system had completely changed and the MA was awarded to candidates without the need for them to continue their studies any further. I should briefly add that American universities developed the doctorate course, with the effect that the MA began to hold a place above the baccalaureate and below the doctorate. The university of London adopted that model, moving away from the mediaeval practice. Newer universities followed that lead, with the result that the practice at Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin, which might be called the Oxbridge and Dublin model, is now considered by some to be an anomaly.

At Cambridge, the MA is conferred by right on all those who have obtained a BA degree not less than six years from the end of a graduate's first term of residence, providing that they have held their BA for at least two years. An MA degree is not available at the university of Cambridge as a postgraduate qualification.

On the other hand, the Oxford MA degree, following long-standing tradition, like at the university of Cambridge, is a mark of seniority within the university that may be conferred after a period of 21 terms—seven years—after matriculation. An MA is not available at the university of Oxford as a postgraduate qualification. Oxford's guidance to students on the Oxford MA states that

> "the Oxford MA is about reaching a new status within the University and not an upgrade of your BA or an additional qualification."

It is perhaps worth mentioning a couple of the comments that Oxford and Cambridge made following remarks by an academic at Cambridge university's computer laboratory in May last year. Cambridge university's council said that the degree was valuable. It stated:

> "The council believes that the (MA) degree continues to serve valuable purposes which outweigh any negative external perceptions of it. The QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) is well aware of the degree's status and has not expressed any concerns about it."

According to *Cherwell*, an independent student newspaper at the university of Oxford, a spokesman from the Oxford university press office said that the issue had been raised by an MP, and that it was therefore difficult to gauge public opinion on whether the system should be changed.

I understand that the universities have concerns about how up to date the research was on which the QAA has based its findings. Although there are concerns about the nature of Oxbridge MA degrees, they are not widespread. I have met dozens of employers over the years, and I have never heard one of them say that they are confused by the Oxbridge and Dublin system of awarding MA degrees. I am also not aware that any business has been duped or suffered any loss as a result of employing someone from Oxbridge or Dublin who has gone down the route of having their degree upgraded in that way.

In the same way, when speaking to graduates of other universities who have undertaken a course of study for their MA degree, I have never come across any ill-feeling towards Oxbridge graduates because of how they have achieved their MA award. One has to ask whether it is such a problem that it warrants the abolition of the long-standing and traditional practice of those two ancient universities. In many ways, it marks them out as special; today most people would still accept that having an Oxbridge degree is different and more special than having one from other universities.

The fact that the Oxbridge MA is awarded in replacement of, and not in addition to, the award of a bachelor's degree is particularly noteworthy. To me, that strongly makes it clear that it is based on academic rank rather than academic merit. The four ancient universities of Scotland—St Andrew's, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh—award MA degrees as first degrees in certain subjects, as do Dundee and Heriot Watt universities. How Trinity College Dublin awards MA degrees is similar to how Oxford and Cambridge do.

Oxbridge MA degrees are distinct in purpose and nature. For example, they give the right to vote in elections for the chancellor of the university. The universities and the QAA make it absolutely clear that the MA degrees are not academic qualifications. The granting of master of arts degrees is, I believe, a matter for the universities themselves to consider as autonomous institutions primarily responsible for academic standards. I wonder to what extent they would welcome what one might call the intrusion into their affairs by the House.

UK universities have thrived under the existing system; recent statistics show that only the United States of America boasts more institutions than the United Kingdom in the top 200 of the *Times Higher Education* world university rankings for 2011-12. In the light of that

[Mr Nuttall]

evidence, there is nothing to suggest that the qualification is damaging their world-class reputations. Both Oxford and Cambridge offer a range of taught master's degrees, none of which is called an MA. We must not lose sight of the fact that there are real inequalities of opportunity in education. In the last year for which figures are available, just 40 of the 80,000 pupils eligible for free school meals made it to Oxbridge.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The hon. Gentleman is now going wider than what is in the Bill. He should go back to talking about master's degrees.

Mr Nuttall: It is certainly essential that qualifications awarded by higher education institutions meet national academic standards to ensure that the world-class reputation of our United Kingdom higher education institutions is maintained. I will listen closely to the rest of the debate, but, on balance, I am probably minded to follow my normal instinct—"If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

It is probably right that the issue should remain primarily within the remit of those individual universities. However, I can well see why folk might think it rather strange that in this day and age this ancient anomaly is allowed to survive. However, it does not seem to cause anyone any great problem, concern, upset or loss. I would need to be convinced by yet more evidence, which I have not seen so far in the debate, that this is an appropriate time to end this long-standing practice. I shall listen closely to the remainder of the debate.

2.4 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): I am honoured to have my first run out at the Dispatch Box in my new role as shadow Minister for competitiveness and enterprise on the seventh anniversary of my maiden speech in the House, which I delivered from the other side of the Chamber. I have to say that I much preferred it on that side of the House and I hope, for the good of the country, that we will change places with the current Government very soon.

I was enthralled by the speech of the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) and I am grateful to him for saving me the cost, expense and trouble of buying his political memoirs. I shall just look at today's *Hansard* to learn about his political upbringing.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) on bringing the Bill before the House. He mentioned during his ten-minute rule speech on the Bill in February and again this afternoon that most postgraduate students who hope to receive an MA will often undergo further intense study, will have their knowledge and application tested by examination and will often pay substantial tuition fees for the privilege. He is right to suggest that we should question whether it is right and fair to have a dual system of obtaining MAs under which some people work hard for a substantial period and others simply attend a particular institution and pay a £10 admin fee. It is also right that we pay tribute, as he did, to the hard work and dedication of tens of thousands of postgraduate students.

It is important to say at the outset—and the hon. Member for Bury North alluded to this—that the relevant framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland published in 2008 states categorically:

> "The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are not academic qualifications."

Similarly, the Scottish credit and qualifications framework published in 2009 states that in a small number of universities in Scotland the Scottish bachelor's degree is entitled "MA", although that, too, in most cases, is not a master's degree.

I shall address the reputation of UK universities and the importance of overseas students in a moment. First, let me say that my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East is right to suggest that many students who are thinking of coming to study in our ancient universities might be unclear about the status of an MA from one university to another. Of course, they would undertake research—and perhaps they should not think of undertaking an MA if they cannot do such rudimentary research—but I stress, as I think my hon. Friend would, that clarity, fairness and transparency would be beneficial to all concerned.

There has been much discussion in recent months about the future shape of the UK economy and how we will pay our way in the world in the face of intense global competition. It is clear to me that this country needs to play to its strengths and provide help and support to those areas of economic activity where Britain leads the world and has an ambition to continue to lead the world in future. One of these world-beating sectors is undoubtedly higher education. Britain has led the world and has an enviable reputation on higher education institutions. As the hon. Member for Bury North said, the *Times Higher Education* world university rankings for 2011/12 show that three of our universities are in the world's top 10, with the only other country in the top 10 being the United States. Of the world's top 200 universities, 32 are British—a figure that is again surpassed only by the US. This broad base of excellence in higher education should be celebrated and nurtured as much as possible. For the particular discipline of science and engineering—an academic discipline in which we should aspire to lead the world, and one that should have considerable marketable commercial opportunities in the modern global economy—three British universities are in the top 10.

We have seen a real success story for higher education institutions in this country in the past decade. The sector educates about 2.5 million students annually, with a 28% increase in student numbers in the past 10 years. Some 400,000 overseas students attend our higher education institutions each year, largely because of this country's leading reputation in higher education, particularly postgraduate education. This provides the national economy with an additional £2.5 billion each year. It is particularly interesting, and relevant to the subject under discussion, that full-time postgraduate numbers have increased during the past decade by almost three quarters, largely due to the increase in non-UK students, who tend to study at postgraduate level.

Our higher education institutions are true incubators for innovation, undertaking research and development at master's and PhD level. Postgraduate students at our higher education institutions are undertaking research, and providing the learning and knowledge that will be applied commercially to supply modern products that British companies can then sell to the rest of the world. We should be celebrating and supporting them.

In those circumstances, it is important that there is clarity and transparency to ensure that students who wish to study for a master's qualification are fully aware of its requirements and standards. In March 2010, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education published a new reference point, "Master's degree characteristics". The QAA states that the

"landscape for master's degrees in the UK is flexible and diverse",

which is something that the Opposition certainly want to encourage and develop.

One of the reasons the higher education sector in the UK is appreciated throughout the world is its flexibility and diversity, and the Opposition do not want to put that at risk. We fear, however, that the Government's changes to HE will hinder choice, reduce the subjects on offer at postgraduate level at our HE institutions and ultimately undermine Britain's global competitive advantage in higher education.

As has already been said, HE institutions are autonomous, and they will do as they see fit, based on what they wish to achieve for themselves and their students. I do not want to propose anything that would put that under threat. I also do not want to burden the sector with additional or excessive regulation, particularly when it is enduring the biggest upheaval in its funding arrangements for many years. The Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East is not particularly bureaucratic or excessive. It promotes transparency and clarity, and does nothing to undermine either the reputation of our higher education institutions or the unique historical shape and culture of our ancient universities. We believe that some of the issues raised could be best explored further in Committee, so I hope that the House will give the Bill the fair wind it deserves and allow it a Second Reading.

2.12 pm

The Minister for Universities and Science (Mr David Willetts): I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) on driving the House to focus on an interesting curiosity in our higher education system. I declare a kind of interest as one of the people who did indeed shell out—eventually—to buy my MA, in order to vote in the elections for the chancellor of the University of Oxford and for the professor of poetry. I declare that interest.

Let me describe briefly exactly what the Oxford and Cambridge MAs are. The Oxford regulations set out clearly their understanding of the degree of master of arts: in essence, the holder of the degree of bachelor of arts or bachelor of fine art may with the approval of their college apply for the degree of master of arts after the 21st term from his or her matriculation. The current fee for admission at Oxford is £10, and the qualification confers membership of convocation and the right to vote for the chancellor and the professor of poetry.

Membership of convocation is part of the argument. As Oxford's regulations suggest, it is a means whereby all graduates of the university

"have an opportunity for some continued formal involvement in the life of the university, supplementing…the links that colleges develop with their old members."

Chris Leslie: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister at the beginning of his speech. Is there a particular reason why use of the title master of arts is needed to confer those rights? Surely, he must admit that the university could confer the rights without the confusing mark of master of arts.

Mr Willetts: I will turn later in my remarks to the challenge, which the hon. Gentleman has raised again, of whether the arrangement is confusing, but, historically, the way in which membership of the convocation has been conferred is through the MA. Obviously, it provides those rights to vote that I mentioned. Of course, it has been considered from time to time, both in Oxford and Cambridge, whether that arrangement should continue. For example, in the Franks review of Oxford, its anomalous nature was noted, but it was decided that it was overall a feature of the system that should be preserved.

The Government of course attach great importance to rigorous national academic standards, and I agree with what the hon. Member for Nottingham East said and with the remarks by the shadow Minister, whom I welcome to his new post and to the debate. We share pride in the world-class reputation of higher education in the UK, and we have a shared recognition that that international reputation depends on confidence in the standards of our universities and confidence that they are properly regulated through independent quality audit. Higher education councils have a statutory responsibility to ensure the quality of the higher education provision that they fund, but primary responsibility for academic standards and quality rests with individual universities and colleges, each of which is self-governing and has its own internal quality assurance procedures, complemented by the external quality assurance carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. The QAA is the key agency in ensuring that quality control, and we support and value its work.

The QAA has itself tried to engage with the issue from time to time. Its 2008 framework for higher education qualifications includes the following statement:

"The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are not academic qualifications. The MA is normally granted, on application, to graduates of these universities with a Bachelor of Arts (BA). No further study or assessment is required, but the recipient may be required to pay a fee.

At the University of Oxford, the MA may be granted during or after the twenty-first term from matriculation and at the University of Cambridge the MA may be granted six years after the end of the first term."

So that is the position, which the QAA has set out very explicitly.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge have been clear themselves about the status of the MA. I quote from a letter from the University of Cambridge that was actually sent to the hon. Member for Nottingham East:

"It has always been well recognised that our M.A. is not a qualification obtained by postgraduate study but, rather, is a mark of status and experience which gives its holders certain rights within Cambridge, particularly in their participation in our democratic governance structures".

Chris Leslie: It might have been well recognised by the closed circle within Oxford and Cambridge themselves, but the rest of the world does not recognise that, so surely the Minister would have to acknowledge that clinging to the pretence of the title Master of Arts degree is a complete and utter nonsense.

Mr Willetts: Perhaps this is the moment to engage that point. The hon. Gentleman has to offer evidence that the arrangements are causing widespread confusion. We have seen no such evidence. All the material that is available on the websites of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge makes it absolutely clear that their MAs are not qualifications obtained by postgraduate study. The QAA's documents make clear the status of these qualifications, and we are not aware of the widespread confusion and misunderstanding that the hon. Gentleman claims to have identified.

Chris Leslie: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he has been extremely generous. On the evidence point, in 2000, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education undertook an opinion poll survey of recruiters. It reported that 62% of employers thought that MA Oxon. or MA Cantab. was a genuine, hard-earned postgraduate award. Surely that is sufficient evidence.

Mr Willetts: The hon. Gentleman has cited that evidence in the past, but the evidence from 2000 predates the work that I have described. It was because of that point that the QAA engaged with the subject. It has made explicit in its publications what the Oxford and Cambridge MAs are, and Oxford and Cambridge prospectuses and websites are now very explicit on that point. He needs new evidence; he cannot simply rest on evidence from 2000, given that so much more is now done to be explicit about the unusual characteristics of these MAs.

The challenge set by that research in 2000 has been addressed by Oxford and Cambridge, and it is hard to imagine that anyone who had done a minimal level of research could be in any doubt about the nature of the MA from Oxford and Cambridge. It is not an academic qualification; it replaces the BA as the holder of the BA develops a longer relationship with those universities. The hon. Gentleman has to provide further information than he has so far been able on the argument that there is confusion for employers.

A related argument is that somehow the system undermines the value and standing of MAs awarded by other universities. Is it therefore the case that the victims are not employers, but people who have MAs from other universities? I freely accept that those MAs are genuine academic qualifications for which further work is required after a BA has been secured. Again, I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that we do not have any evidence. I have letters on a wide range of issues in higher education, but in my 18 months as Minister responsible for these issues I have not had a single letter that I can recall saying, "I got my MA from some other British university and I find that it is not respected, because people think that I got it only because I was trying to elect the chancellor of the university, or the professor of poetry." The hon. Gentleman has a theoretical argument that is not borne out by the practical evidence on confusion for employers or for people who receive their MAs from elsewhere. I commend to him the formulations now explicitly used by the QAA and set out in statements from the universities in question: the MAs that we are talking about are "not academic qualifications."

For us to act, we would not only have to be persuaded of the problem of confusion, but would have to take a significant step towards intervening in the internal arrangements of the universities in question. That is where the position of the shadow Minister rather surprises me, because my view is that intervening in such a way in the autonomous decisions of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge would go contrary to what I thought was the shared view of both Front-Bench teams—the view that the autonomy of our universities was one of the reasons for their success.

The shadow Minister may have thought that it would be easy to turn up and attack this apparently anomalous situation, but if he wishes the matter to go further, he has to explain why he would be so willing to interfere with the autonomy of the institutions that we are talking about, including autonomy over their academic awards, which was most recently protected and laid out explicitly in legislation that his party passed when in government in 2005. That protects universities' powers to award their own qualifications. In many of my exchanges with the shadow Minister's predecessors, they have gone out of their way to say that they value the autonomy of our institutions. Government Members believe that trying to intervene in well-established practices at Oxford and Cambridge would be an interference with their independence that would undermine the Government's wider approach to their autonomy, and would be inconsistent with the principle of institutional autonomy enshrined not just in the legislation that his Government passed, but in section 63(3) of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Chris Leslie: The Minister is very generous in giving way. The whole point of a quality assurance agency is to have some level of quality assurance across the university network. He would not allow universities to confer any old title—perhaps PhD or MP—on a smaller or unworthy qualification. There must be some quality assurance across all higher education degrees.

Mr Willetts: That is the role of the QAA. I will be frank with the hon. Gentleman. This is where I have to reveal myself to the House as a Conservative. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I welcome the support from my hon. Friends. If Oxford and Cambridge came to us today and said, "We've got a smart idea. We wish to invent MAs for Oxford and Cambridge that can be secured with no further academic study and will be different from the established conventions for creating an MA," the QAA would be wary of that approach. However, those MAs have been around for hundreds of years, and they are a well-established pattern. They are well understood, and they are an established part of the history of these institutions.

Autonomy comes partly from historical experience. The autonomy of those institutions is not simply a result of the rational assessment of what they do today but, in the case of Oxford and Cambridge, it has partly been secured by their history and traditions. Part of respecting their autonomy is about respecting their history and traditions. The MAs at Oxford and Cambridge go back to the mediaeval universities where, after a time securing a BA, people then secured an MA. Perhaps the Opposition's rootless rationalism means that they have no taste or love for those conventions and traditions that have developed over centuries, but we rather like ancient traditions. The hon. Gentleman has not established that they actively do any damage, because his argument about confusion is not supported by the evidence, so I see no reason for interfering with the autonomy of those institutions simply to remove an historical feature that they have enjoyed for centuries. I rather like the fact that we have centuries-old traditions.

Chris Leslie: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm that, under the rules of the House, if the Minister is still speaking at 2.30 pm, the Bill will fall and will not complete its Second Reading? If he wants to explore the issues in more detail in Committee, he must stop speaking before then. I want to clarify exactly what his intention is.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I think that the hon. Gentleman has been here long enough—indeed he is a former Minister—to know exactly how the rules work. At 2.30 pm, I shall ask on what day debate on the Bill is to be resumed.

Mr Willetts: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for making clear what we all understand on both sides of the House. I have accepted many interventions from the hon. Member for Nottingham East, and perhaps if I had not done so I might have been able to get even further in my remarks, but I wanted to ensure that at least I engaged with the points that he made.

He has enabled me to set out my beliefs as a Tory in protecting those institutions and traditions when they do not do anyone any damage. It is clearly the Oxford and Cambridge connection that excites Opposition Members, and they have not focused on the fact that MAs are a widespread feature of Scottish universities. We have heard very little about Scotland's ancient universities.

St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh, as well as Dundee and Heriot Watt, award a master of arts as a first degree as a consequence of their history. The proposal would have to be introduced on a consistent basis, applying also to Scotland, but some people would note that to attack an ancient tradition that is enjoyed by some universities in England, and at the same time to ignore a similar tradition that has developed in the ancient universities of Scotland, would be an example of the hon. Gentleman attacking the traditions of some English institutions but not showing a similar degree—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 20 January 2012.

Business without Debate

COMMON FISHERIES POLICY (WITHDRAWAL) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November 2011.

FIRE SAFETY (PROTECTION OF TENANTS) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (19 November), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 20 January 2012.

CONTAMINATED BLOOD (SUPPORT FOR INFECTED AND BEREAVED PERSONS) BILL [*LORDS*]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November 2011.

SALE OF TICKETS (SPORTING AND CULTURAL EVENTS) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (21 January), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 20 January 2012.

KINSHIP CARERS (PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AGREEMENTS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2012.

HOUSE OF COMMONS DISQUALIFICATION (AMENDMENT) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (9 September), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 November 2011.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When I moved the House of Commons Disqualification (Amendment) Bill, I believe it was objected to by someone who would be personally affected by the Bill. Was it in order for that person to object?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): That is not a matter for the Chair. Any Member may object. That is up to them.

PETITION

Sentencing (Knife Crime)

2.33 pm

Nick de Bois (Enfield North) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to present a petition from the residents of Enfield. For too long the borough of Enfield has witnessed the deaths of young people. Tragically, the most recent was that of a young man with a very bright future, Steven Grisales, who in September became the victim of a fatal stabbing by teenagers. Youngsters get into knife crime for a number of reasons. The signatories to the petition ask the Government to introduce amendments to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill that will allow a mandatory custodial sentence for those under 18.

The petition was raised through the efforts of many of my constituents and with the loyal support of the *Enfield Independent* local newspaper. The petition states:

> The Petition of residents of the London Borough of Enfield,
>
> Declares that the creation of a new offence of using a knife to threaten or endanger a person is welcome, as is the proposal to introduce a mandatory six month custodial sentence for those convicted of this offence; further declares that the new offence and sentence is only set to apply to those over 18 years of age, despite serious knife crimes being committed in this borough and elsewhere by people younger than 18.
>
> The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Justice to give urgent consideration to amendments to ensure that the new offence also applies to under 18s.
>
> And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000970]

Concessionary Coach Travel

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Greg Hands.)*

2.36 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): May I start by saying how grateful I am for the opportunity to raise concerns about the potential reduction in services and increase in fares that will result from the Government's decision to withdraw the coach concessionary travel scheme? At the outset I would like to thank the organisations, including Mencap, Age UK and National Express, for the help and advice they have given on preparing for the debate. I congratulate and thank my colleagues who have worked hard on this issue, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), who tabled early-day motion 2181 on the matter, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who has led a formidable campaign against the cuts to the scheme as Labour's transport spokesperson, and the many Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who have campaigned hard on behalf of the many constituents who have written to say what a huge difference the scheme has made, enabling them to stay active and see friends and family. I also commend the *Express & Star*, Britain's leading evening newspaper, for the great campaigning work it has undertaken to highlight this important matter and fight for a fair deal for pensioners and the disabled.

The House will know that the coach concessionary travel scheme provides half-price coach travel for disabled people and those aged over 60 in England and Wales. The bus service operators grant allows some operators of coaches and local buses in the UK, as well as community transport schemes, to reclaim some of their fuel costs. Excluding concessionary travel, it represents the main source of bus support currently funded by the Department for Transport. The provision of travel concessions on coaches does not come under the general concessionary fares legislation that applies to local bus routes. Instead, there is a non-statutory arrangement that enables long-distance coach operators to claim the grant for offering concessionary fares to all passengers aged over 60 and those who qualify as disabled.

The concessionary fare is available on selected coach services to destinations within England and Wales, and to Edinburgh or Glasgow from England and Wales. It is calculated as up to 50% at off-peak times and up to 30% at peak times. Disabled passengers should always be offered a concessionary fare, but they may be asked for proof of eligibility. More than 11 million people are eligible for the concession and around 3 million concessionary journeys were made on coaches across England in 2009-10 alone.

It was announced in the Government's comprehensive spending review that the grant will be maintained at current levels until 2012 and then reduced in phases between 2012 and 2015. The cuts apply only in England, as the Welsh and Scottish Administrations have pledged to retain their provision of the scheme. The total reduction will be 20%, with savings amounting to approximately £17 million, forming part of the Government's £254 million cuts to the bus service operators grant overall. As a result, the current non-statutory arrangement that enables long-distance coach operators to offer concessionary fares to older and disabled people will cease at the end of this month. Pass holders will still be able to benefit from the scheme, but they will have to book their journeys before midnight on 31 October and travel on or before 31 August next year.

Let me turn to the impact of the reductions. The Department for Transport acknowledges that the funding enables bus operators to provide more services and at lower fares than would otherwise be possible, and its own equality impact assessments show that the proposed changes to the bus service operators grant could result in operators increasing fares and/or cancelling routes deemed no longer financially viable due to declining users. The Department acknowledges also that cuts to the grant would adversely effect the equality of opportunity for, and discriminate directly or indirectly against, disabled people.

Despite that, the Department defends its decision, claiming that disabled people will be "insulated" from fare rises, as they will still be entitled to local concessionary fares, but the truth is that the cut to coach services comes on top of significant reductions in Government funding for local bus services, so many of those pensioners and disabled people with free bus passes will no longer have a bus on which to use them in their local areas.

At the same time, coach operators face some of the largest financial challenges that they have encountered in years. The DFT is looking to coach operators to continue to offer the concessionary fares increase on a commercial basis, but fuel prices mean that many operators are unlikely to be in a position to continue to offer concessionary coach fares at their current level once the grant is reduced.

National Express, for example, the biggest long-distance coach provider benefiting from the grant, with at least 30% of passengers receiving concessions on 18 routes, has drawn up plans to replace the scheme by introducing a £10 concession card that will enable passengers who are more than 60 years old or disabled to qualify for one third of the cost of coach travel, but they will not be able to use it to travel to or from an airport. That new scheme is obviously welcome, but the company itself points out that it will not match the terms of the Government-funded half-price concession, and, if a company such as National Express struggles to offer an equivalent concessionary scheme, it seems unlikely that smaller providers will be in a position to do anything like maintaining existing concessions, so passengers are bound to see increased fares and reduced services as a result of the changes.

As I said earlier, more than 11 million people are eligible for the concession, and about 3 million such journeys were made in 2009-10. As the *Express and Star* showed, 1.2 million pensioners and disabled people in the west midlands, including 77,000 in my borough of Dudley alone, will lose their half-price travel if the cut goes ahead. But it is not the statistics that make the impact of the cut clearest; the truth is that if pensioners and disabled people lose their right to half-price travel, their ability to get out and about, visit family and friends, go shopping or have a day out will be severely restricted.

Ken McClymont, a disabled constituent, told me:

> "Taking a coach is usually the best value and most flexible means of public transport for me to use. Any changes to local services or ticket prices will have an impact on my ability to travel. I should be very grateful if you would encourage the Department for Transport to work with the coach industry to fully understand and reduce the impact of the scheme's removal or at least delay the scheme's withdrawal until the full impact on people like me is understood."

Mike Nicholls from the Wolverhampton pensioners convention said:

> "Rail travel is already escalating out of our reach and now coach travel will as well."

One woman contacted me to explain how the concession enabled her to visit her granddaughter in Sussex and great-granddaughter in London several times a year. Now, those trips will cost her several hundreds of pounds more every year.

Mencap has warned that the proposal will have

> "a significant and disproportionate impact on people with a learning disability. The introduction of a concessionary fare for the disabled and elderly people is recognition of the additional financial barriers individuals face... This could leave many people in the situation of choosing between stretching already tight budgets or not travelling at all. For many people with a learning disability, this could be the only means of getting out and about to visit friends and family, go shopping or generally exercising their own independence."

The charity says that the proposal will have a

> "major impact on many aspects of disabled people's lives"

because transport

> "helps to achieve greater mobility and independence."

"However," it says,

> "most people with a learning disability do not drive and half of all families with a child with a disability do not own a car. This means that people with a learning disability are reliant on public transport. A lack of access to transport denies people with a learning disability the right to a basic level of independence, choice and opportunity, which many others take for granted."

Age UK says:

> "Making longer journeys is about to get more difficult for many older people. Removing the concession will mean higher prices and some people will think twice before travelling. People in later life that are at risk of facing loneliness and social isolation will be further put off from leaving their home."

And look at the comments from their members. One lady wrote:

> "I travel a lot by National Express as with the concession it was affordable and as a widow I felt safer and more comfortable on the coach and don't have to worry about my luggage...looks like that will soon be coming to an end".

Another said:

> "Bearing in mind that most of the National Express coaches that I get to go down to babysit in the school holidays are mostly full with concessions I can see buses running half empty or even complete services being taken off. I think that this is a really bad decision and very short sighted. This is the tip of the iceberg and if they get away with this we all know what will go next."

We all know that the deficit has to be tackled and savings have to be made, but all these organisations and elderly and disabled people across the country are asking the Prime Minister to honour the promise he made before the election when he said:

> "Labour are trying to frighten old people by saying we'll take away bus passes, or winter fuel payments. Well I can tell you we're going to keep those things."

Age UK, Mencap and coach operators across the country are all asking the Department to think again or at least to delay the plans. Age UK got it right when it said:

> "There has been no public consultation on the change to coach concessions, which means disabled and older people have been excluded from the debate and decision-making process. The government should seriously consider delaying plans to cut the

[Ian Austin]

concession to allow enough time to consult properly with both concession pass holders and operators. With proper consideration an alternative solution could be agreed."

Mencap is urging the Department for Transport to delay the proposed cuts and to consult coach operators and pass holders to determine a way forward that protects the scheme. Mencap believes that a more desirable solution could be reached by balancing the savings that are required with mitigating steps to preserve concessions for people who rely on the scheme so that they can remain independent and be able to make essential journeys. National Express is still asking whether the Government would consider its offer to maintain the existing scheme at a lower rate of public subsidy.

Even at this late stage, will the Minister agree to delay this cut and commit to proper discussions with organisations such as Mencap and Age UK and the elderly and disabled people they represent? Will she meet me, representatives of these organisations and operators such as National Express to discuss how these vital services for some of the UK's most vulnerable people can be saved?

2.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I thank the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for raising this issue in the House today and I congratulate him on securing this debate on concessionary coach travel, which is a very important issue. From 2003, the coach concession has entitled the over-60s and eligible disabled people to half-price travel on many long-distance coach services, but the coalition has made it clear that our priority has to be reducing the budget deficit we inherited from the Government of whom the hon. Gentleman was a member. In order to achieve this, several difficult decisions have had to be taken, including this one on concessionary coach travel.

The deficit crisis we inherited has inevitably meant that some funding streams have had to be ended. But the consequences of failing to deal with the deficit would be worse, including spiralling interest rates and the kind of crisis enveloping other European countries; more and more taxpayers money being spent servicing debt; and a massive legacy of debt left for future generations. Given the scale of the crisis we inherited from Labour, it simply was not possible to insulate concessionary travel completely from the measures needed to reduce the deficit. Funding for bus and coach travel had to take a share of the cuts that we have to make, and so the decision was taken in the spending review to end the coach concession scheme from October this year.

I recognise the concern this decision causes to those who valued the coach concession and I welcome this opportunity to respond to some of the points made by Age UK and Mencap. We are listening carefully to what they have said, and I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), will be happy to meet them to discuss this matter further.

I want to emphasise that our decision does not in any way reflect our wider view of the importance of coach travel as a mode of transport. Coaches provide an important choice on many inter-urban routes, with services that offer good value for money in vehicles that increasingly offer a very high-quality and excellent environmental performance. However, taking a difficult decision to end the coach scheme has meant that we have been able to protect higher priority programmes, including the national bus concession. Even in these times of austerity, the coalition Government have been able to continue the national concessionary travel scheme for local buses, despite all the scare stories that were circulated by our opponents during the election. This support for the national bus concession scheme is contained in the coalition agreement, and it was reconfirmed by the Chancellor in the spending review.

The local bus concessionary scheme benefits about 11.5 million people every year, allowing free off-peak travel anywhere in England. In 2010-11, 1.6 million concessionary bus trips were made by pass holders in England—34% of total bus trips. This generous concession provides older and disabled people with greater freedom and independence and a lifeline to their community. It enables pensioners and eligible disabled people to have access to facilities within and outside their local area, and helps them to keep in touch with family and friends. That is why it has been a priority, despite the deficit, to protect this concession. However, a deficit reduction programme inevitably means making tough choices between competing priorities. The Government believe that keeping the local lifeline provided by free local bus travel had to be given priority over the coach concession scheme.

The hon. Gentleman complained about the lack of consultation. He will recognise that there was an urgent need to provide a credible deficit reduction plan at a very early stage of the coalition Government. If we had not done that, we would be facing the kind of crisis that has beset some of our European neighbours, who arguably have less serious deficits than we do. The only reason we have achieved the stability that we have in relation to the deficit crisis is that we have produced a credible plan. That required prompt work, which meant that it was not possible to carry out a consultation on this decision. However, an equalities impact screening assessment was carried out, and it was published on the Department for Transport's website in November 2010. My ministerial colleague the hon. Member for Lewes recently wrote to the chairman of the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee about the issue. When the funding for the scheme formally comes to an end on 1 November, a full regulatory impact assessment will be published and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

As with all decisions in the spending review, we have sought ways to ease the process of implementation. This is one of the reasons the Government gave participating coach operators, and the public, 12 months' notice of the scheme's coming to an end. We recognised that a period of notice was very important to give operators sufficient time to plan for the removal of the grant and to give their customers reasonable notice of the changes to concessions that we had unfortunately had to make.

It is also important to note that coach operators are, of course, free to continue to offer concessionary travel to older and eligible disabled people on a commercial basis. Another advantage of allowing a period between the announcement that the Government scheme was coming to an end and this decision being implemented was to give coach operators the time to develop new concessionary travel products. Indeed, the Government were pleased to learn this week that, as the hon. Gentleman said, National Express will be offering a replacement concessionary coach scheme from 1 November this year. I understand that it will give those aged 60 and over and eligible disabled people a third off the price of coach travel in England when they buy a concession card.

Although the concessionary coach travel scheme had to go, I emphasise that the Government are still working hard to encourage more people to use buses. We fully appreciate how important they are for a range of groups in society. Bus services contribute to both of the Government's key transport priorities: creating growth and cutting carbon. By providing an attractive alternative to the car, we can not only cut carbon, but unclog the congestion that can choke our local economies and hinder jobs and growth. Throughout our decisions in the spending review, we were determined that buses and public transport should continue to receive their fair share of funding, within the constraints of the deficit that we unfortunately inherited from the previous Government. A range of programmes aimed at making bus travel more attractive is under way. Again, that is despite the constraints on budgets.

The latest estimates show that in the last financial year, local and central government spent more than £2.5 billion on support for local bus services. That includes more than £1 billion on concessionary travel and £420 million in bus service operators grant. Reductions in that grant are to be implemented next year, but they are far less severe than many predicted and there is reason to believe that the bus industry will absorb them without a major impact on local fares. It is true that reductions in local authority budgets are having an impact on supported bus services in some areas, but by no means in all.

In addition to the formula grant that goes to local authorities to support bus services, the Government have paid almost £47 million to local transport authorities and bus operators to purchase 542 low-carbon buses across England. We are particularly keen to build the capacity of community transport organisations and have provided local transport authorities with £10 million of extra funding to support that sector. That money was found from savings made at the Department for Transport in the coalition's first year in office. Lastly, we have established a £560 million local sustainable transport fund to support our transport goals of supporting growth and cutting carbon. Many of the successful bids to that fund are providing improvements to local bus services and facilities.

In conclusion, this Government have had to take difficult decisions to deal with the deficit that we inherited from Labour—a deficit as serious as anything that we have seen in this country's peacetime history. Ending the concessionary coach travel scheme is one of the many melancholy consequences of the economic mismanagement of the previous Government, who borrowed heavily during the boom years and left us in a disastrously weak position when the lean years arrived. Although the coach scheme has gone, we have continued to protect free travel on local buses for older people and eligible disabled people, providing them with vital access to employment, health care and other essential local services.

Question put and agreed to.

2.59 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 October 2011

[MR MARTIN CATON *in the Chair*]

Gangs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Miss Chloe Smith.)*

9.30 am

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue in the Chamber this morning, and I am grateful to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), who had the original idea for this debate, and brings such issues to the House regularly. You will recognise, Mr Caton, that in August we saw some awful scenes of social unrest in this country that we had not seen for a considerable time. Following those riots, much has been said about gangs in our society.

As the MP for Tottenham, it is important to say that although I recognise that gang members were certainly caught up in the violence, the evidence made available to me by local police, the arrest sheets and the issues arising from the riots suggest that it would be wrong to infer that those riots were orchestrated by gangs, or at least that gangs were central to them. The issues are complex and many, and include policing. The riots involved not just people who do not have a stake in society, but those who got swept up in the social unrest and found themselves doing unimaginable things.

We have an opportunity this morning to reflect on gangs and gang membership, how we are tackling the problem, the other crime and violence issues relating to gangs, and some of the underlying causes. The starting point is that gangs are not new. We probably all recall reading "Great Expectations" at school, and recognise that gangs are not a new phenomenon in British cultural life. Indeed, in other periods of hardship, young men in particular have clustered together and caused mayhem and havoc for those around them.

A particular phenomenon has developed in London, and has accelerated over the last decade. Associated with the gang profile are members who are increasingly younger and often teenagers, and a growth in knife crime. The figures for knife crime rose last year, as did those for violent crime among young people, and those of us who represent London seats suspect that we are seeing a rise in knife crime as we speak. Drug-related activity is also associated with gangs.

The issue is of tremendous concern. I am aware of four knife crime victims in the London borough of Haringey in the last two weeks alone. During the summer, one gang member was stabbed twice on two separate occasions in as many months. That is the toxic and worrying nature of the issue. When trying to understand the problem in the context of what success looks like for young people in a constituency such as mine, I usually boil it down to five issues: education, employment, community, aspiration and parenting. I want to touch on those five issues in relation to gangs and why young people in constituencies such as mine are being seduced into gang membership.

Constituencies such as mine and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) are often described as inner-city constituencies, although I have never liked the phrase because it suggests that it is acceptable to have an inner city when I would like to live in just one city. Some crimes are associated with seats such as ours, but the profile of youth violence throughout London has changed. The face of gang membership is diverse, and seems to be associated as much with the inner city as with suburban London. Parochialism is manifest in gangs, and I constantly find it peculiar to see the turf wars that go on between one gang in the N17 and N15 postcode and another in the N22 postcode in Wood Green.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Many incidents of gun and knife crime relate to conflicts between Tottenham-based gangs and Hackney-based gangs criss-crossing the border between the two boroughs.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In days gone by, she and I have had to discuss attending funerals and memorial services for gang victims because of the sensitivities between those on one side of a street and those on the other side. In the Stamford Hill part of my hon. Friend's constituency a wonderful young man, Godwin Lawson, who was an aspiring footballer, lost his life when he was brutally stabbed in the street one evening. His family have been so honourable in the tragedy that befell them. I remember walking with my hon. Friend in Stamford Hill where one side of the street was in her constituency, and the other was in mine. It seems that poor Godwin had simply strayed into a different patch, and died as a consequence. My hon. Friend has great experience of that, and we have seen hyper-parochialism develop throughout London.

Hon. Members in the Chamber will have similar experience of the obsession with postcodes. Many young people are worried that when they leave school, particularly secondary school, at 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon or travel on the bus to and from school they may cross postcodes and go into other areas. Parents who attend our surgeries say, "I don't want my daughter or son to go to that school. I have to get to work, so they go to school on their own, and I am worried. They say that there are gang members on that bus, and that because they come from the wrong postcode there will be problems." The local authority is co-ordinating and staggering school exit times to try to avoid such problems, but there are areas of London where young people who come from different postcodes meet—as one would expect—and things flare up. Gang activity is at the centre of that.

Over the past few years there have been gains in education, particularly secondary education, but all London boroughs have seen an increase in the number of children in care following the cases of baby P and Victoria Climbié. When I visit pupil referral units and look at the issues faced by children in care, I see a pattern that still prevails for young people in such circumstances. I am concerned that pupil referral units and help for children out of school remain, to some

[Mr Lammy]

extent, a Cinderella service. Frankly, it should be a Rolls-Royce service if we are to support young people when they are at their most fragile, and prevent them from falling into trouble during those initial stages.

I have been clear that the rioting that we saw across London was of a complex nature. One important issue, however, is unemployment, and it falls to national Government to do something about that. The Northumberland Park ward of my constituency has Tottenham Hotspur football club at its centre, but it is also the ward with the highest levels of unemployment in London, with 20% of young people claiming jobseeker's allowance. In some communities—I think of the Somali community and parts of the black community—that figure is double, and such unemployment stretches out for months and months. I am from Tottenham which, I remind the House, saw similar levels of unemployment during previous recessions in the 1980s. It is a tragedy that the parents who were unemployed then now have children who are unemployed—whole families who have not seen employment.

The issue is simple. As my mother used to say, "Idle hands make the devil's work." We need a firm grip on growth in our economy, and we must look at where jobs are and how we can get them to those families and young people. Most of my constituents who were in employment worked in the public sector—it has always been that way in the borough of Tottenham—but many of those jobs have been cut. Those employed in the private sector often work in retail and the service economy but, as the House will have seen from the latest figures, that sector is shrinking and no one is anticipating a boom Christmas sale period. It is hard for those twenty-somethings to get a foothold in employment and the economy. We have seen a growth in apprenticeships, but it is not clear that we have seen the scale of growth that is necessary, particularly in London and constituencies such as mine.

Despite all that we may learn from American senior police officers, unless they come with a growth strategy in their back pocket it will be pretty hard for my constituents to believe that staying off the street and in meaningful employment is a genuine prospect. One can knock on any door in the Northumberland Park ward and what people say is simple: why are there so many young people on the streets with apparently nothing to do? That is how people get caught up in gangs. As I have said, this is not a new subject; Dickens wrote about it—the Artful Dodger was effectively in a gang. A bit of petty theft here and a bit of small drug running there; that is how people get caught up in criminality, and before they know it they are carrying a knife for protection or, if really serious, a gun. That is the pattern we see.

Ms Abbott: I agree with everything my right hon. Friend has said about employment, but one aspect of the way that some young people are caught up in gang culture means that if they were offered a decent job tomorrow they would not take it, because they have grown accustomed to easy money and an easy life, and do not know what it means to get up and go to work at 8 o'clock in the morning, as our parents did. I do not want to take away from what he has said, but how to wean a generation away from a semi-criminalised subculture and into the world of work is a complex question.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That brings me to the other ingredients of the debate—aspiration and community. It is clear that too many young people are losing all contact not only with work, but with what I call character-building activities, such that they can engage in that work. We live in hyper-materialistic, consumer-driven times. That affects us all, but I believe that it can affect the poorest most harshly. Middle-class families can introduce all sorts of things into the home, such as scouts, football or ballet classes, which will ameliorate some of the other possibilities in their children's lives. That is not the case for many of my constituents, and youth services in the London borough of Haringey have been cut by 75%.

For a parent—I say parent, because it is often a mum struggling on her own—it is a challenge to create aspiration and compete with the drug dealer on the other side of the street who offers a quick way to get easy money, particularly while she is trying to hold down a job. Often, it is not even one job, but two, because we all know that here in London it is virtually impossible for a constituent such as that single mum to earn a living wage with just one job. That returns us to the issue of how to be there for our young people and what it means to be family in London: it is about not only absentee fathers who do not take their responsibilities seriously—something I have raised many times—but how hard life is for those who want to take their responsibilities seriously.

I think of a family who were challenged in court this summer because their 15-year-old daughter was caught looting. The parents did not turn up to court, and the judge said, "Where are the parents and what are they up to? This is typical." I know the parents; indeed, the family have been known to me for many years. Dad is a minicab driver, and as a consequence works irregular hours to make ends meet. Mum has a small business. They are churchgoers. They are struggling with a large family and doing the best that they can, but they are a classic family working all hours just to make ends meet and are not able to be entirely on top of everything that their young people are doing because of what is required to make a living wage in the London economy.

Hon. Members know me well enough to know that it would be very unusual for me to make excuses for young people who, in the end, have moral choices and choose to pick up a knife and use it, or choose to deal crack cocaine. However, our economy is important. That is why I raise the issue of unemployment. The culture that surrounds our young people is important. That is why I raise the issue of hyper-materialism and how quickly and easily a young boy can get caught up in it. Before we know it, he is off with a gang, even though he has parents who are doing their best.

In the end, we are centred on how we deal with the issue. There are innovations that I want to see in the system. I congratulate the London borough of Waltham Forest—no doubt my good and hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) will draw on this in her contribution—on the development of the Connect model. The measures to which I am referring involve getting around these young people in a co-ordinated way, intelligence sharing across the different stakeholders—the local authority, the health authority, the police, social services, youth services and others—intervening in chaotic families and saying to young people who we know are caught up in crime, violent crime and gang membership, "We will give you a chance if you take the services available to you. We won't lock you up. If you take that chance, we'll help you to get out of the gang, but if you don't take that chance, we will be very heavy-handed through the arm of the law." I am talking about giving them that possibility and, as a consequence, seeing the numbers fall from the dire and very concerning level in Waltham Forest of just a couple of years ago.

In Haringey, we look forward to applying the Connect model to how we begin to deal with gangs and gang membership in our borough, but we are doing so against a backdrop of a 50% cut in our youth offending service. I recognise that we are living in times of austerity. I do not want to rehearse the debate in the House about cuts, cutting too quickly and all the rest of it, but I do want to say that some services need to be immune to some of what is happening and the youth offending service must be one of them.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Some of the networks that are available and could be used in inner-city and urban areas throughout the UK are, of course, school networks. That is not a cheaper option, but one that should certainly be resourced. I am thinking of school breakfast clubs and post-school clubs, where young people are encouraged to stay on and become involved in activities that are more positive than some of the things to which the right hon. Gentleman has alluded.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If a young person lives on the 15th floor of a tower block on one of my local estates, an after-school club is vital for their mother in seeking employment—if she is tempted to seek employment, who will take care of her child when school finishes? A breakfast club is essential if she has a cleaning job and Dad drives a minicab. In those circumstances, the young person getting to school early and getting a good breakfast is not an add-on; it is essential, but it is not clear that that is happening.

Let us examine the figures. Last year, knife crime rose by 8% in London. In addition, 43% of 11 to 13-year-olds and 50% of 14 to 16-year-olds said that knife crime and street violence were their No. 1 issue. Against that backdrop, we needed a youth offending service. We needed people to get to these young people early and work with them on intervention, prevention and persuasion. The service was developing, not mature, and was, in a sense, fairly new. I am alarmed that in the London borough of Haringey the budget has been cut by 50%.

In addition, some essential co-ordinated activity is not going on in a statutory way. Members of the voluntary sector often get together and debate these things, but it is not clear that there is any statutory obligation at all for the various services to be sat around a table, co-ordinating activities, profiling these young people and sharing intelligence.

Beyond the local authority, the activity that I have described is not happening London-wide. The border between Haringey and Hackney is porous, and the border between Haringey and Waltham Forest is porous. I am talking about co-ordinating intelligence. What is happening with these families? Which older brother went to prison last week? Which father found himself in trouble? Did domestic violence take place last week? It is essential that the various professionals have the ability to talk to one another and therefore know what is happening and or can predict what will happen, but that is not happening across London.

The Minister needs to examine that issue and needs to press the Mayor of London on it. There has been a lot of rhetoric and talk, but not a lot of action. The Mayor ran for office and won the election on the basis that he would reduce knife crime, so all of us must be very concerned that that is not happening. If anything, the problem has accelerated and got worse. Co-ordinated activity is essential. I am not saying that all this can be driven from the top, but it is possible to press for best practice, understand what is happening and see different professionals speaking to one another about those families and young people. That is not happening across London; it needs to happen, and much more purposefully. I hope that the Minister will say something about the youth offending services and teams that have been cut, and about what co-ordinated activity is planned across and beyond boroughs London-wide.

It is also clear to me that we are not sharing best practice and intelligence across the country, because I have been to other cities that are beginning to struggle with gang crime in their communities and they feel behind the curve in relation to some of the things that we have become familiar with in London.

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is important to put it on the record that there have been improvements in some statistics for some areas of serious crime, whether knife crime or gun crime, in recent years, although I accept that there is a tendency now to move in the wrong direction. We all know that just to bandy around statistics is not a sensible route forward. I very much take on board the idea that there needs to be far more co-ordination within London. The right hon. Gentleman referred to his own local authority perhaps being behind the curve compared with the neighbouring authority of Waltham Forest, which has put in place the Connect programme. It is important that, rather than getting into a sterile debate on statistics, which I accept happens on all sides in political discourse in London, we acknowledge that the Mayor and his predecessor have recognised the importance of dealing with gang crime and, in particular, the terrible statistics for knife and gun crime. Whether there is a slight reduction or not, any deaths that take place because of knife or gun crime are terrible tragedies, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The point I am making is that, two years ago, the assistant borough commander, the head of the youth service and her representatives, and representatives of social services, health services and schools were sat around the table—routinely, every month—discussing the group of young people who were getting caught up in this situation, and that funds were coming through to support that activity. I am afraid that they told me last week that that has ended. They are engaged—meeting voluntarily, every six weeks—because they are so concerned, but there is no statutory framework for that activity, and neither is there the support and diversion activity that needs to happen.

[Mr Lammy]

The hon. Gentleman will appreciate from his long experience that what those young people need is diversionary activity and intervention. That requires resources. If he speaks to colleagues in Waltham Forest—my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow might say something about this—he will hear that they are concerned about resources. I think that this is one area in which we can make the plea for resources, because the consequences of under-resourcing will cost us so much more. The co-ordination and resources that must rightly follow, so that those professionals can do their job, are essential.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is clearly drawing on his extensive experience. To return to the issue of youth offending, is he calling for ring-fenced funding from central Government to go to local authorities, or does he believe that local authorities themselves have a duty to prioritise youth offending funding within their budgets?

Mr Lammy: I am not calling for prescription; it is not for me to prescribe how this should be done. That must be a matter for the Government. What I am saying is that this is a priority and a real issue in London. Youth services are being cut and reduced across London. It is easy to make the point that the London borough of Haringey, for example, should prioritise youth services at a time when it has to cut £40 million in year from its budget. I am worried, however, that I will be here with colleagues next year and that the figures will have gone in the wrong direction, because we will have been unable to prioritise the service.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, although I do not recognise a picture that suggests that gangs were behind this summer's rioting and social unrest, it is clear that gang members were part of it. I have spoken to the manager of JD Sports in Tottenham retail centre and to the manager of Comet. I have also looked at some of the video and pictures of complete lawlessness, which ran for more than five or six hours—there were more young people in that shop that night, looting and robbing, than during the day—and I do not want my constituents to get accustomed to such things, because that would be dangerous for any society—those events have to be a one-off. Those charged with intervening in, dispersing and engaging with often chaotic families, as well as those who co-ordinate pupil referral units and ensure that young people in care are properly provided for, who work with families, who think about a living wage and about our economy, and who ask hard questions about where the jobs are in a constituency such as Tottenham, recognise that this is important.

Although I am pleased that the Government have said that they want to prioritise the issue, as a Back Bencher I want to scrutinise how that is done. We should, of course, speak to those from across the pond who have experience in this area, but I have now been the MP for Tottenham for 12 years and, when I began, knife crime and gangs were certainly not a major phenomenon of the capital city. In those days, the caricature was of yardie gangs—I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington will recall reading about them in the papers. The situation has changed completely and we have a decision to make: are we going to see gangs and that terrible youth violence as a permanent phenomenon of our economy and country, as in parts of downtown America? We are on a cusp. We can either get over the problem with proper, co-ordinated quality effort, or I am afraid that it will be a permanent phenomenon of our modern economy.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Martin Caton (in the Chair): Order. We have just 36 minutes before the winding-up speeches need to start, and at least five Members have indicated that they wish to speak. If Members bear that arithmetic in mind, we will be able to get everybody in.

10.5 am

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on his speech. I will try to be brief. He is right to identify that the riots were, in essence, an example of opportunistic, rather than systematic, gang-related criminality. None the less, it is important that we discuss gangs, not least because we will have an opportunity in 48 hours to discuss, in this same Chamber, the riots in greater detail.

I respect the right hon. Gentleman's contribution. None of the issues is open to a simplistic analysis or easy solution. It is perhaps the nature of the 24/7 media world in which we live that that expectation always exists. In the immediate aftermath of the riots, there was a sense that we should have some quick and easy solutions, but I think that the lesson is that, much as I accept his call to arms and passionate push for urgency, we also have to be patient. This needs systematic work within our communities to try to make sure that we break down the culture of violence and criminality, as well as the entirety of gang culture.

I am very much a sound money man. I have been a great believer in getting our deficit down and have tried in my own constituency, almost uniformly, not to make the case for more money to be pushed in a particular direction. I am, however, aware of gang culture in my own constituency and in the past few days I have written to the Home Secretary to make the case for moneys that would otherwise be taken away from Westminster city council to be put in its direction. There is a bigger issue of gang culture in the constituency of the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). The terrible shooting that took place on the Mozart estate only a week ago was a classic example of that.

In my constituency, the Churchill Gardens estate is not too far from where we sit this morning and there is increasingly great concern that it has almost a critical mass of would-be gang culture that has the potential to cause great blight to the locality. A lot of it is driven by the postcode war, with gangs from north and south of the river—the Churchill Gardens estate looks out towards Battersea and the south of London. There is real concern that we need to put some resource into prevention rather than cure.

I accept what the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said earlier. One of the greatest difficulties is that the lifestyle has almost become chaotic and that it is difficult to wean people off. I also noticed that she raised her eyebrows when the right hon. Member for Tottenham suggested that gang culture was not an issue in 2000 when he became an MP. It has been a problem, although I think that there is now a critical mass in parts of London that used to feel unaffected by it. One of the interesting things about the riots was how previously quiet suburbs, such as Clapham and Enfield, which were perhaps regarded as leafy suburbs not too far away from some of the gangland areas of south London, Edmonton or Walthamstow, suddenly became subject to some real problems. That is something that we have to bear firmly in mind.

As I have said, this will require patient, time-consuming activity. The St Andrew's club, of which I am proud, as the local Member of Parliament, to be president, is even closer to us than the Churchill Gardens estate; it is within 500 yards of Parliament. It was the oldest boys' club and is now a boys and girls' club. A phenomenal amount of resource was put in to ensure that there were sports clubs and teams. There are also opportunities for dance and music lessons.

The club desperately requires funding. The local authority is not able to give it the funds it has had in recent years. We have tried to build up a trust, so that relatively wealthy people living nearby are able to put in money. It is helpful—not so much in keeping people off the streets, although that is one distinct element of it—and its catchment area goes well beyond the immediate vicinity of Westminster. The clubs that it puts in place go south of the river.

That opportunity for distraction, provided by clubs in particular, is, as the right hon. Member for Tottenham said, something that we middle-class parents can often provide for our children almost as a matter of course, without recognising that for many others costs and more general factors make the opportunity much more limited. I hope that in such areas we can try to wean people off gang culture, although it is extremely difficult. Even if there were a direct economic choice between a job and the attraction of cheap and easy money, compatible with a chaotic lifestyle, it would be difficult to wean many long-standing gang members away. Aspiration is an issue: paucity of aspiration and of expectation.

I want to finish with one other observation. I do not want to play down the importance of the issues. I have a feeling that, although we have not had to worry about gang culture in my constituency, we may go beyond the critical mass in a year or two, if we do not nip things in the bud today. However, we must also recognise there are many unsung, relatively quiet young men and women in our communities, doing a phenomenally good job. They work hard and have developed aspirations. Perhaps it is self-discipline that has brought that about, rather than anything from their family. They are unsung heroes and I hope that they will play their part in improving their communities in years to come. It is important that we should not look on young people as simply problematic. We can be proud of them, while we do our level best to tackle the problems addressed in the debate.

10.11 am

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on opening the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on initiating it. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) would also like to take part, but she cannot be here today.

Lewisham is by and large a safe place to live. People generally get on with one another. Children play in our parks, and I shall walk home from the station tonight without fear. I mention that because my experience of Lewisham is probably different from that of some of my younger constituents, who have seen the lives of friends and family devastated by serious youth violence. My perception of Lewisham is probably different from that of local parents who are worried about the safety of their children. In the past four years, there have been 67 incidents of known gang-related crime in the borough, four of which resulted in someone dying. In the same period, there were 673 instances of gun and knife crime, and 17 people were killed. I do not quote those figures to sensationalise; I do it so that everyone will be clear about the scale of the problem.

In the past few months, since the riots, gangs seem to be back on the Government's agenda. Whether the subject is a cross-departmental taskforce to look at ways to deal with gang culture, or extensions to gang injunctions, Ministers want to talk about gangs. It is all very well to be interested in gangs now, but with the exception of Brooke Kinsella's report last year and the announcement in February of some ring-fenced funding to tackle gang, gun and knife crime, the Government have been dangerously slow off the mark in addressing the challenges posed by gangs and gang violence.

Last September, in an Opposition-day debate, I urged the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice to look at ways of tackling material that appears on the internet glorifying gang membership and the carrying of knives. Video after video, filmed in a car park in Catford in the heart of my constituency, is put on YouTube. They are often viewed as many as 16,000 times. Young men, or perhaps I should say boys, brandish knives in front of the camera as if they were cigarettes. I wrote to the Minister two days after the debate, providing him with an example of the footage and asking what action the Home Office would take. In November I wrote again, chasing a reply. In January I spoke to him after he appeared before the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, but to date I have not had any response to my inquiries; so when the Government talk tough on gangs and want to find someone and something to blame for the riots, I cannot help but wonder why they did not do more to address the sort of problems that many of us were bringing to their attention long before the riots.

If I am honest, I do not know what the Government can do to tackle the problem of online material such as the videos that I have described, but I fear that, if thousands of young people have viewed that footage and think that it is in some way cool, it would not be at all surprising if some of them also got caught up in thinking that some of the agitators in the riots were pretty cool, too.

Mr Mark Field: The hon. Lady complains that the Government and perhaps the current Mayor of London have not produced the goods, as she would have liked, but it is only fair to mention that, in the past few years, 10,000 knives and guns have been taken off the street, in

[Mr Mark Field]

a widespread amnesty, and we have also ensured that there are an additional 1 million police patrols per year on the streets of London. It is also fair to say that that builds on what happened under Mayor Livingstone, but the trajectory has been in that direction: we have continued some of the important work done in our capital city in the past decade.

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman acknowledged in his speech that in recent years there has also been an upward trajectory. He urged patience, and I am not sure that patience is possible in this situation, because young people are being killed and maimed on our streets. We need to tackle the situation urgently.

I have spoken about my frustration in trying to get the Government to examine the big issues, and I urge the Minister to update us on the conversations that he has had with companies such as YouTube about how, when the police know such videos are out there, they may perhaps be enabled to get that material taken down.

Having spoken about online manifestations of gangs, I want to turn to some of the wider action that is needed if we are to deal with a problem that blights the lives of too many young people in big cities. Yesterday, I visited XLP, a youth work charity based in my constituency. Its founder, Patrick Regan, is the author of "Fighting Chance: Tackling Britain's Gang Culture". I urge the Minister and all hon. Members who are present to read it. It is a powerful and enlightening contribution to the debate about why young people are involved in gangs, what solutions are needed and, indeed, what solutions work. Anyone who reads the book will realise that there is no magic wand to be waved to tackle the problem of gang violence. What is clear is the fact that any gang strategy must address all aspects of the problem. We must seek to understand the reasons behind gang involvement and, equally, why most kids do not get involved. Let us be clear: the vast majority of kids, even on some of the most challenging estates, are not involved.

To put it simply, if we are to tackle the problem of gangs, we must find a way to get those who are now in gangs out of them; we need to help those who are in prison as a result of being in gangs not to return to gangs when they come out; and we must help those who are caught up in gang violence to deal with their anger in different ways. Often, retaliation and reprisals lead to an escalation of violence. How do we stop things getting worse at that stage? Most importantly, we must prevent people from getting involved in the first place.

What should we do? My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham is completely right to talk about jobs. I have said before that young people in my constituency stop me in the street and say, "What are you going to do to help me get a job?" If young people do not have real opportunities, we will not reach a situation where they do not see involvement in gangs as the easy, quick-win solution. However, we need to do other things, such as getting youth-led projects into schools when young people are at the right age, so we can make it clear to them that, if they carry a knife, it could end up injuring them. We need to provide young people with accessible role models, who are in it for the long haul, giving the support and encouragement that may be missing in other parts of a young person's life. We need to ensure that the one-to-one mentoring and encouragement that a young person in a pupil referral unit might need are available, and can be funded. We need to give confidential support to young people who present themselves at an A and E department with a stab wound, so that they can find a way out of some of the problems. As I have said before, we need to work with those who are in prison to give them a fulfilling life to get away from gangs on their release.

When I spoke to staff at XLP yesterday, I asked them what the Government should do to tackle the problem of gangs. They were clear in their response: jobs, a better balance between enforcement and engagement, and funding of initiatives that have been proven to work. XLP gets £10,000 a year from the Home Office. It has a track record in delivery, going into schools and doing the things that I have talked about. It is changing young people's lives; it is probably saving their lives.

I say this to the Government: take the millions of pounds that they plan to spend on police and crime commissioners and invest the money in community-led projects that are already tackling gang and knife crime. Young lives are being lost in some of our big cities because of the violence associated with gangs. That has to stop. Talking tough is not going to solve the problem. A proper, thought-out and credible strategy, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham said, might give us a fighting chance of tackling some of the problems, and I implore the Minister to set out what the Government are going to do.

10.20 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on opening the debate in a well informed manner, drawing on his constituency experience. He rightly concentrated on what we need to do to stop young people from going into gangs. I would like to focus a little on what measures senior police officers believe should be in place to tackle gangs in which young people are involved. The four measures that have been highlighted by the officers are: sound mechanisms for identifying gangs and gang-related problems; the ability to track gangs; tough enforcement; and the ability to signpost gang members out of gangs.

Regarding sound mechanisms for identifying gangs, there is clearly a role for safe neighbourhood teams on the ground and for grass-root organisations. At a higher level, we will have the national crime agency, which has to play an important role in identifying gangs, particularly when they go from being a gang into organised crime.

On tracking gangs, a number of hon. Members referred to the ongoing multi-agency work, such as safeguarding hubs in London and information-sharing hubs, where different bodies that have responsibility or have contact with gang members can pool their information to ensure that they are monitoring the young people as effectively as possible and bringing positive measures to bear on them. Clearly, there is a need for that information to be cross-borough, as the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) highlighted. Gangs cross borough boundaries, so having an information-sharing hub that is borough-based is not good enough; it needs to cross borough boundaries to work with neighbouring boroughs.

Regarding tough enforcement, there are now gang injunctions, although I have some reservations about the evidence threshold that will be used for them and about the cost, which senior officers have mentioned. That may be because we are at an early stage of using gang injunctions and there is a learning curve that has to be followed. However, I support the fact that gang injunctions have the power to compel young people to undertake certain positive activities, because that is a major plus point and will help with tough enforcement.

On signposting gang members out of gangs, a large range of organisations in the voluntary sector and in government provides activities. I understand that there is a database where such information is held, which may need updating. It includes details of organisations such as Kickz, Cricket for Change and a host of other effective organisations such as Voyage or Horizons, run by the Met Black Police Association. We need to ensure that the information is up to date so that, when a member is identified, the relevant activities can be signposted to them to help them out of their gang environment.

I know that, in such debates, it is easy to fire a long list of questions at a Minister, which he or she, unfortunately, will not have time to respond to at the end of the debate, so I will leave the Minister with just one point, which is about the Cardiff model. The principle behind the Cardiff model is that a hospital would communicate with the local police about where people with gunshot or knife wounds were coming from, to ensure that the police could bear down on a particular pub or estate where the problems were being generated. There is some confusion in London at the moment as to whether hospitals are doing that. I would like the Minister, now, if possible, or in writing, perhaps to the benefit of all hon. Members, to confirm that all hospitals, in London at least, have signed up to the Cardiff model. That model has generated a substantial drop in the number of serious injuries; I think the quoted figure is 40%. We want to see that effective model deployed across London and beyond, so that other parts of the country can experience the same drop in serious injuries.

10.25 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The first thing to say is that gangs are not a new problem: many of the issues being debated today have been raised in the past. What has become frightening in recent decades, going back to the 1980s, is that inner-city gangs who once upon a time would have solved their disputes with their fists began to do so with knives and guns.

There is sometimes an assumption that gang culture, knives and guns are all a euphemism for young black criminality, but let me put it on record that there is not a racial issue with gangs. People are often surprised when I say that the knife crime capital of Britain is neither Hackney nor Tottenham, but Glasgow, which has had a knife crime problem since the 1950s. Gangs are about a toxic convergence of collapse of existing economic structures, a hyper-masculine culture, and increasing materialism, which we are seeing in the 21st century. I wanted to nail that because some of the debates that we hear in the media would have us believe that the problem is one for a particular ethnic group.

Although we in the House often talk about gangs as if they were all the same, gang culture is quite complex. For instance, an increasing number of girls are involved in gangs; there are even girl-only gangs. Some gangs are more on the classic Kray and Richardson model, which are relatively organised groups of men in their 20s or older involved in systematic crime. Often, however—this is one of the big issues in areas such as mine—much younger children in their early or mid-teens are involved in gangs, which are entirely chaotic, using firearms because of issues of respect, such as if someone steps on their shoe in a night club. Such gangs are harder to deal with and less amenable to control than the more stable and relatively sophisticated adult gangs. The police have told me that adult gang members despair of teenage gangs because they are so chaotic and cause so much uproar and upheaval.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said, gangs did not cause the London riots. Clearly, many gang members were involved in the riots and were on the streets of London, but the idea that the riots were a consequence of organised gang activity is almost too easy and stops us from looking at the complexities behind the issue.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned the problem of postcode gangs, which shows how hyper and how calcified gang culture has become in the past 20 years. I remember walking down my road—Middleton road in Dalston, Hackney—and a young man buttonholing me and saying, "What are you people going to do so that there are more facilities for me? Otherwise, there is nothing for me but crime." I said, "What do you mean? We have just built a brand new swimming pool at the end of Middleton road in London Fields park." He said, "You don't understand. The park is in one gang's territory, and I live at the other end of the road, in another gang's territory." That young man genuinely was not able to cross the boundary to go to the end of the road to use the facility. The postcode nature of gangs makes it difficult to work with young people and provide the leisure facilities and youth clubs that they want. We can pump a lot of money into a club, but a lot of young people will not set foot in it because it is in the wrong postcode.

We talk about gangs in an entirely judgmental and negative way, but we must consider what they offer our young people. Unless we understand that, we will not know how to contest the culture. For many young people, the gangs offer a family, a structure and people whom they can look up to. In a completely warped and criminal way, the gangs offer guidance on being a man. We must understand that and the breakdown in the family structure that has happened if we are seriously to engage with the issue of gang culture. Of course we need to spend money on law enforcement, but we must understand that the gangs offer many young people safety and a quasi-family structure, which they do not get anywhere else.

There is also a huge amount of peer group pressure on young men, particularly on young black men, to join gangs. I live in Hackney and have brought up a son in Hackney. It is very difficult for someone to walk down the streets in Hackney if they are not in a gang or do not know what streets to avoid. We cannot underestimate

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the peer group pressure on perfectly decent young men from decent families to get involved in this semi-criminal activity.

The final incentive for being in a gang is economic. Someone who does not have a job and has no prospect of having one will view a little drug dealing, a little drug running and a little this and that as an economic model.

I want to talk about education, which is not the responsibility of the Minister but relates strongly to the issue of gangs. By and large, young men who are in college doing their AS-levels are not on the streets involved in gangs. There is a direct relationship between educational failure and criminal activity. Years ago, Martin Narey, who is now the head of Barnardo's, said, "On the day you permanently exclude a child from school, you might as well give them a date and time to turn up at prison." Until we engage with the long-term issue of educational failure, we will not properly deal with the roots of the gang culture, which is something that I have worked on for many years.

A few weeks ago, I went to my sixth annual awards ceremony for London's top-achieving black children. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) was right when he said that for every one gang member there are thousands of young people in London who are trying hard, trying to get qualifications and trying to move forward. It is important that we do not see all our young people, particularly those in minority ethnic groups, through the prism of gang culture, because there is so much more going on; there are so many young people who are really trying.

Clearly, gangs are a law enforcement issue, and it is appropriate that we will hear from the Home Office Minister and his shadow, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). None the less, gangs are complex. They cover issues of family, breakdown of employment and access to jobs. When I was a child, my father was a sheet metal worker—he left school at 14 in Jamaica. Every day that God sent, he went to work. On Friday, he would come home with a brown wage packet and give pocket money and a bar of Cadbury's fruit and nut chocolate to my brother and me. We grew up believing that a real man goes out to work and looks after his family, but the children on my estates have never seen that. Very often, they are in households with no male, let alone a male who gets up every day and goes to work. In the absence of that family structure, the lure of the gang with the apparent easy money, the glamour and the girls is strong.

There are issues of family structure, education and educational failure. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham said, pupil referral units—I do not mean to disrespect the people who work in them—are often little training academies for gangs. There are also issues of law enforcement and of resources. However, we must remember that each and every gang member, however frightening they may be and however abhorrent and criminal the activity they engage in, is someone's child. There would have been a point in their lives at which, with the right intervention and the right diversion, they could have been put on the right path.

The Minister will talk about the law enforcement issues, but we also need a holistic strategy if we are to save a generation of young men of all colours and all ethnicities from a life of the street and the gangs. We all know that the life of a gang member is often very short. If these young men could see what awaits them, whether it is prison or dying in the road in a pool of blood, the immediate attraction of gangs would not be so apparent. It is for us as politicians and as members of the community to offer holistic strategies on the gang culture.

10.35 am

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Caton, for allowing me three or four minutes to sum up this matter from the Back Benches. I speak as someone who spent 15 years at the criminal Bar. I was involved in nine different murder trials and prosecuted far too many punch-ups in the pub and knife crimes, in criminal courts up and down the country. I was also a specialist in relation to special educational needs and the special educational needs and disability tribunal. I advised multiple local authorities on the matter of statements.

I may represent 1,150 square miles of beautiful Northumberland countryside, but the east end of Hexham is a complex and difficult area. Sure Start, the Hexham East Number 28 project run by the Hexham community partnership and the Hexham East residents association, and the local police have dramatically turned the area around.

I notice that there is nobody here from Scotland, which is a great shame. Although I do not denigrate the amazing work that has been done by so many in London, there is no question that the essence of gangs derives from Scotland, both in relation to the knife crime that was alluded to by the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and the tremendous success in dealing with the issue. I applaud the work of Karen McCluskey who is pioneering the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence, which is based on Operation Ceasefire that was used in Boston. It is a fantastic scheme and should be supported. Sadly, because of illness, I missed the House's debate on the riots, but the Prime Minister was right to praise and support the work of Karen McCluskey. Thanks to her there has been about a 50% reduction in murder and knife crime in her city. I urge the Minister to support her scheme and use it as a model to be rolled out in other places.

Finally, the vast majority of young men who were involved in the incidents in London and in various other parts of the country had a criminal record or had undergone some sort of custodial treatment, whether in a young offenders institution or in prison. Clearly, one cannot generalise but I must do my best in the minute that is left to me. The three issues that we must address in relation to young offenders institutions and prisons are literacy, which dovetails into education—clearly, the literacy and education of these young men and women is extremely poor—skills, and the revolution around drugs. If we address those issues, as part of the reform of prisons and young offenders institutions, we will be able to grab the people who have slipped through the net at an earlier stage.

10.38 am

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to be making my first speech as a shadow Home Affairs Minister on the issue of gangs. Like many of the Members here, I have lived and breathed this issue for many years as a resident, an MP and a community activist. In that spirit, let me put it on the record that I am sad that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) cannot be here because I know how strongly and passionately he feels about the matter. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field), the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) for their contributions. What we are seeing today is a strong commitment from all parts of the House to tackle the issues that are driving gangs in communities across Britain. Clearly, many of us in London are living with these issues on a day-to-day basis, but we recognise, as the hon. Member for Hexham pointed out, that these problems are experienced across the country and as such they deserve a joined-up approach.

With that in mind, my contribution on behalf of the Opposition is a reflection on what is important in terms of the evidence base that we draw on when we have conversations about gangs. I am mindful that the Government have said that they will bring forward a gangs strategy in October. I want to ensure that the lessons that have been very well drawn out in the debate today—about the need for a joined-up approach and for a range of Government Departments and partners at national, local and community levels to be involved—and some of the concerns that we have about the ability of that work to happen, are made clear.

It is important to have two debates on this subject this week. This debate about gangs is different from the debate about riots that will happen later this week. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham pointed out, these issues have existed in our communities for many years. What we saw over the summer was not a reflection of those issues, but it was informed by them. It is important to draw that distinction.

It is also important to have a clear understanding about what gangs are. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington made that point very well. When we talk about "gangs", sometimes we all think that we are talking about the same thing but actually we are not. I am mindful of the work of Professor John Pitts, who made a number of studies about the nature of gangs in our communities. In fact, he studied my own community in Waltham Forest and he came up with six different typographies of what a gang might be.

It is helpful to think about the difference between the organised and serious crime gangs that we see in the UK—there are estimates that about 30,000 people are serious, hardened criminals who are part of those gangs—and the gangs that we have talked about more today: the gangs of young people who are drawn together in our communities, sometimes involuntarily. Professor Pitts talks about the "reluctant gangster", the young people who feel they have no option but to be part of a gang in their local community, either to gain protection or to get opportunities that they do not feel they are getting in other parts of their lives. We must understand that we need approaches that tackle both those types of activities, rather than simply having one approach. That is also important given what my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said about recognising that this issue affects not just young men and that increasingly young women are a part of gangs, and also a part of the solution in terms of addressing how we might tackle gangs.

When the Government are looking at gangs, although we may only be starting to understand the nature of gangs in our communities and the variety of gangs that we must address, it is important to remember that a lot of good work has already been undertaken in local communities and indeed at national level. I urge the Minister to draw heavily on the joint thematic report that was produced last year, which I found to be a very useful guide. I think that the hon. Member for Hexham also drew on it, when he talked about the importance of the youth offending teams and the work of the youth offending institutions in tackling gangs. The joint thematic report was a very useful guide to some of the good work that is going on to join up services. It looked at some of the challenges that exist, including what we can do from Whitehall to join up services and to help to co-ordinate action.

The borough of Waltham Forest in my constituency has had a problem with gangs and so has been piloting a range of ways of dealing with gangs. I feel strongly that that work is important, not least because today—purely by coincidence—a young man's family is coming to visit me in Parliament to meet Louise Casey and to talk about people who are victims of gangs. Eze Amosu was a young man killed by a gang in my community. When we talk about gangs and how we might approach them, it is important that we recognise that young people are primarily the victims of those gangs. It is important to support victims' families too in the work that we do.

We know the importance of a joined-up model. As I said, Waltham Forest has been one of the areas piloting a range of activities, following on from the Strathclyde model that the hon. Member for Hexham talked about. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington was also right to talk about the Cardiff model and how we join up the reporting of what is going on in hospitals. The police are sometimes late to the game in terms of knowing where gangs are and what incidents have occurred. We have seen some real progress in the past couple of years in working together to identify people who have been victims of gang crime and in supporting them to come forward, either to remove them from gangs or to help to bring prosecutions.

What do those lessons teach us? They teach us, not least, the lesson that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham referred to, about the tricky question of resourcing the work to tackle gangs. As I think the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster accepted in his contribution, such work is an investment and joining up those services to get a preventive approach rather than a curative approach is the way forward.

Bearing that in mind, I have some concerns about the future of some of the projects that have worked so far. I am particularly mindful of family intervention projects, which we know are facing cuts. Also, our youth offending teams face cuts. When we are looking at cuts of 20% in our youth offending teams, and indeed at some youth offending teams being cut entirely, as we have seen in Cornwall, many of us have genuine concerns about the

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nature of the expertise that we may have to draw on in tackling gangs and what might happen to that expertise in the years ahead.

It is also important to look at some of the projects that are peer-led. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East talked strongly about the importance of young people themselves addressing some of the concerns about gangs. We have seen some fantastic work with projects such as Leap that teach conflict prevention in schools. Equally, Citizens UK has promoted safe havens. Young people themselves have identified such places. All of us who know about the "postcode wars" recognise the concerns that many young people have about going from street to street. We are also mindful of the experience that they have in places that can offer them safety. That work is important.

Even if we are aware of individual projects, the challenge is how we draw all these issues together. That is the test that I want to set the Minister today. If the Government are serious about tackling gangs, policing must be more than a deterrent; it must be part of a preventive approach. In that sense, there are some real tests for the work that must be done across Government.

First and foremost, the Minister must challenge his colleagues within the Department for Education about what is happening to our youth services and more generally about what is happening to the role of schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington put it incredibly well when she talked about the importance of schools in these relationships. When we are seeing the unhooking of the relationships between local authorities and schools, we are seeing a challenge to young people's ability to achieve educational attainment. On a more pragmatic level, safer neighbourhoods partnerships and safer schools partnerships rely on those relationships being in place. I think that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham put it well when he talked about those relationships continuing but on an ad hoc basis. Those relationships are too important for funding and support for them to be unhooked. I hope that the Minister will challenge those within the DFE who are complacent about this issue.

We have already talked about cuts in youth services; some areas are facing cuts of 100%. Without the people who can work at the grass-roots level in our community—to bring the intelligence, and to build relationships between the police and young people—our ability to tackle some of the issues that lead to gang membership will be compromised as well.

On a long-term basis, I hope that the Minister will challenge his colleagues within the Department for Work and Pensions about the issues of unemployment, particularly the cancellation of the future jobs fund. With 50,000 young people in London now out of work, it simply does not make sense to cancel one of the key programmes to help young people who want to get on and make positive choices about the kinds of careers they can have. I hope that the Minister will challenge his colleagues in the DWP accordingly.

Many of us have already talked about the importance of investment in communities and grass-roots projects. I have already touched on the role of youth offending teams and the concerns that we have about the cuts to those teams. However, this process is also about the partnerships that we can build with the voluntary sector and those on the ground in our communities. Many of the youth workers in Walthamstow who I have worked with in the past 18 months have had their funding either scaled back or cut entirely. Clearly, that affects their ability to be out on the streets and to build relationships with our young people to help them to make good choices in their lives. It also affects their ability to work with the police, both when we have events such as we saw over the summer—when we have riots—and in the longer term to build positive relationships.

I also hope that the Minister will challenge the Mayor of London, because one of the central parts of our relationships in London has been the role of the safer neighbourhoods teams and particularly in my area the sergeants who have been able to work on gathering intelligence, and on building relationships with voluntary sector partners and with young people themselves. Clearly, losing 300 sergeants in London will impact on our ability to build those relationships and to work in those ways.

It is not just about the Minister challenging his colleagues in other parts of Government. I also urge him to rethink the proposals on CCTV. The basic ability of the police to monitor where young people are travelling around and where there are gang incidents, and therefore to respond quickly before those incidents escalate and knives or other weapons are drawn, is critical. In my local area, CCTV has played a role in that police activity.

The Government must also consider their approach to antisocial behaviour orders. In Hackney, the police have used ASBOs to great effect to tackle some of the problems around gangs. I know that people have raised concerns about the gang injunctions. I urge the Minister to look again at the evidence on how those measures have been used to deal with some of the issues around gang behaviour.

Above all, the relationship that the police can have with communities is crucial. At a time when we are facing cuts in our policing budget, it is clearly difficult for the police to think in the longer term, yet there has never been a greater need for them to do so. When we are seeing unemployment and poverty rising, the landscape in which the police will be operating will be very difficult. To build those relationships with communities, they need to be able to have the people on the ground. Poverty is not a cause of gangs, it is not an excuse for gangs and it does not explain gangs, but it creates a landscape in which all the work that many of us have talked about today—work that can be the answer to some of the issues about gangs—is harder to do.

I hope that the Minister will take on board some of the concerns that we have expressed that some of the things that are happening in other parts of Government will undermine his ability to address gangs, and that he will act accordingly. I hope that the Government's gangs strategy in October will be cross-Government, that the police will play their part and therefore that the Minister will champion such approaches. Otherwise, I fear we shall be holding similar debates in the years ahead, with the evidence worsening monthly. All of us who care about our constituencies and our country foresee the consequences.

10.50 am

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice (Nick Herbert): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on initiating the debate and on his thoughtful discussion of the long-term issues with which we must grapple, especially the challenge of gangs.

I welcome the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) to the Front Bench and wish her luck. I look forward to working with her—constructively, I hope—because I do not believe that there needs to be partisan disagreement over some of the issues that we must challenge. Although some Members picked up on particular aspects of the Government's approach, which I shall deal with. There is more to agree about over the long-term issues—for example, exclusion and the need to tackle it.

Let me put the issue in context. Of the 4,000 people arrested in the disorders, two thirds were under 25, but only one in eight were known from police records to be a gang member. Although I say "only", that clearly is a large number. However, we must understand that gang membership is a significant part of the problem, but not the only part—it is symptomatic of the wider youth violence that we must tackle. Gang members were often involved in offences at the more serious end of the spectrum—for example, in Birmingham, police officers were fired on by armed gangs.

It is important that we tackle gangs and the emerging problem of gang activity in some cities, but we cannot believe that that is where the problem ends, because the wider issues of offending in the riots must also be tackled. My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Justice announced that three quarters of defendants who appeared in relation to the disorder had previous convictions, and that the average number of offences was 15. A third of those defendants had served prison sentences.

Another lesson we must take from the disorder that goes beyond the issue of gangs is that we have high rates of reoffending, which is no surprise to those who have studied the performance of the criminal justice system for years, and that young people are entering the criminal justice system and finding themselves caught in a cycle of criminality. We must therefore focus on effective reform of the system.

There has been agreement in this short debate that the solution is not enforcement alone, important though it is. Tools are available, including gang injunctions, which we propose to extend to those aged 14 to 17, and effective policing, which will always be a significant component of any response to violence. Opposition Members acknowledged the Prime Minister's response to the riots, in which he announced a cross-Government programme of work led by the Home Secretary that will tackle gangs and gang violence and report to Parliament by the end of the month. The report will be evidence led, as it should be, and will focus not simply on enforcement, but on the wider issues that have to be addressed. The programme has looked at the evidence of successful interventions from abroad and in Glasgow and Manchester, both of which the Home Secretary visited recently.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham was slightly disparaging about what he described as US advisers—Bill Bratton is giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee this morning—but we must take advice and learn from success in our country and internationally. This week, we are convening an international forum on ending gang violence at which people from Europe and the United States will share the benefit of their experience. The Home Secretary has announced that we propose to set up an ending youth violence team, which will draw on independent advice. More will be said about it in due course.

It is common ground that we must focus on early intervention—the earlier the better. The fact that there is serial reoffending is partial evidence that some of the earliest interventions are either not occurring or not working. I agree with the hon. Member for Walthamstow that we must acknowledge the police's role in crime prevention as well as in enforcement. Sir Robert Peel's first principle of policing was to prevent crime and disorder, and it remains true today.

Members rightly drew attention to the importance of effective local partnerships, which we seek to promote. One of the significant features of learning in the past few years has been that effective partnerships between agencies can make a difference in crime prevention and effective interventions. Agencies and local authorities are under a statutory duty to be members of community safety partnerships.

In the little time available, I want to challenge the premise that the solution is money and the fact that we are having to save money means that we cannot find solutions. We have ensured that programmes are targeted on, for example, knife crime, with £18 million worth of initiatives that the Home Secretary announced following Brooke Kinsella's recommendations on combating knife crime. If money was the solution, there would not be a problem, because there has been record spending on the criminal justice system and public services. We must hold a more hard-headed debate on the effectiveness of interventions, rather than assume that resources will be the whole solution. They cannot be the whole solution, nor can we lay the blame for youth violence on cuts.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) spoke about information sharing and the coalition commitment on hospital information. We intend to ensure that that applies across the country, and I shall write to update him on where we are with that.

Rural Bus Services

11 am

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Caton. It is clear that we all understand the importance of bus services to our constituents across the country, especially in rural areas, but the coalition Government's necessary deficit reduction programme is having a marked effect on the ability to maintain a viable rural transport network.

Almost half of all bus operator revenue comes from public funding, making bus services particularly vulnerable to the pressure on public finances that we inherited from the previous Government after the recent economic crisis. Three main funding streams are available to public transport authorities, all of which were affected by the 2010 comprehensive spending review. Taken alone, those tough financial measures might have been bearable for the rural shire counties and the transport network, and two together would have made life difficult, but the three combined have created a triple whammy that threatens the existence of many subsidised routes in some areas.

The first funding stream is local authority revenue expenditure, which was cut this year by 28%. Local authorities use that pot of money to subsidise some transport routes. Changes were also made to the Department for Transport's formula for concessionary fare reimbursements. The special grant that accounted for approximately 40% of funding for concessionary travel in Norfolk has been rolled into the formula grant due to the comprehensive spending review. In 2010-11, the funding available to Norfolk districts was £11 million. In 2011-12, the funding attributed through the formula grant was just £7.228 million. The impact is that Norfolk county council's statutory payment will substantially exceed the allocation, by about £3.5 million. In total, Norfolk is £4.2 million worse off, or £4.4 million on some figures. After negotiations, the county council has done an excellent job of working with bus operators and other transport providers to find another £1.2 million, reducing the gap to just over £3 million.

The funding allocation method from April 2011 uses a standard formula to distribute all funding related to the statutory scheme via the revenue support grant. The formula considers factors such as population density, the number of people over 60 without a car and the proportion of residents on incapacity benefit. Under that formula, Norfolk does not fare well in the funding distribution; it has the second highest shortfall of all county councils for 2011-12. That is on top of figures published yesterday by the BBC showing that public expenditure for the eastern region is the second lowest in the United Kingdom, at £7,300 a head. The north-west receives £9,500, and Scotland receives £10,500. Norfolk suffers for being cast as part of the prosperous eastern region, but figures for the region are skewed by the wealth and prosperity of areas such as Essex and Cambridgeshire. Norfolk has pockets of rural deprivation and, in areas such as Great Yarmouth, severe urban deprivation as well.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a good point. Even relatively affluent regions have pockets of deprivation, particularly rural deprivation, that need to be taken into account. A lot of people who live in more deprived rural environments, particularly older people suffering from fuel poverty, must travel a long way for key services. Is that not a point that he is trying to convey?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. His county of Suffolk has a shortfall of about £1 million. Rural areas are hardest hit, because people have the least opportunity to use public transport and the most need for access to it. I will come to that point in a moment.

Another funding stream is the bus service operators' grant, which has been cut by 20% from 2012. That will have a huge direct impact on bus operators. The Select Committee on Transport report "Bus services after the spending review", published in August, stated that bus operating revenue in England could be reduced by £200 million to £300 million. The impact of that reduction in rural areas must be understood in context: rural authorities already receive less Government grant per head of population than others. The Rural Services Network report by Local Government Futures found that urban authorities receive an average of £487 per head, compared with £324 in predominantly rural areas.

Councils are also exposed to more general increases in costs. Local transport authorities are exposed to the increased costs of providing the statutory concessionary fare scheme. To make up the shortfall, councils are diverting resources from elsewhere, such as previously available discretionary services. Interestingly, since this debate was granted, public discussion on the issue has widened to include concessionary travel more generally. I have been involved with that debate, as have the press in Norfolk. EDP 24 has covered it superbly and supported the Fair Fares campaign, and the BBC and Anglia TV have covered it as well. I will turn to concessionary travel in a moment.

The Transport Committee's recent report noted that by June 2011 more than 70% of English local authorities had decided to reduce funding for supported bus services, and that the extent of the reductions varied considerably, although, in general, rural, evening and Sunday bus services were most affected, as is the case in Norfolk.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I can certainly confirm what my hon. Friend says. In Devon, 70 bus routes have been cut or rescheduled. I am concerned that the social necessity justifying the provision of bus services by local government is still subject to considerable interpretation.

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend, who represents a constituency that illustrates how difficult the issue has been for rural areas. Norfolk is the third worst hit, but Devon has been the worst hit, with a 42% cut of £4.5 million.

The Campaign for Better Transport figures to be published later this week analyse figures requested from local authorities under freedom of information legislation and indicate that 74% of local authorities across England have decided to cut their bus budgets over the period 2011-12 to 2013-14. In Norfolk, to ensure that the cost of the scheme remains within the available budget, the county council has had to announce that it will discontinue most of the discretionary elements that it previously provided, including travel before 9.30 in the morning, the provision of companion passes, and travel all day, every day, for registered blind pass holders.

Norfolk county council's need to meet the shortfall in future years puts subsidised routes, predominantly in rural areas, at risk. Campaign for Better Transport figures show that £36 million has already been cut from local authority funding for subsidised bus services, reducing funding across England from 2010-11 to 2011-12. In addition, more than 1,000 subsidised bus services have already been cut in the English regions. Rural communities will be the ones most affected by the loss of those services, as their Sunday or evening buses will disappear, bus frequency will be reduced and routes could disappear.

Mr Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate; it is telling how many Members have turned up to participate. Does he recognise that the deprivation around former coalfields and the challenge of getting people in those areas to and from employment makes Nottinghamshire a special case?

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Nottinghamshire's funding has fallen by £1.7 million, or about 18%, so it, too, will feel the effect of the changes. He is absolutely right that people in rural areas of all sorts have problems with access to transport, whether they are young people looking for work or older people. Bus services can be their only way of leaving their rural community and accessing an urban area for shopping and everyday needs. That is why things are so difficult for rural areas, particularly in Norfolk. Some villages have low bus usage due to low population, yet buses can be a lifeline for people there who are without access to vehicles. They provide their only mode of transport and access to other areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, rural transport has been provided by community and voluntary initiatives. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that such initiatives could happen across constituencies on the UK mainland? If so, how would that happen?

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I agree that we can do more to look at alternative forms of transport and how they can be funded. If he bears with me, I will come to that in a few minutes, but I absolutely agree with the principle of what he says.

In rural areas, public transport is a lifeline. Equally, however, the problem for local authorities and bus companies is that they have to make an economic case; they have to do the best they can with taxpayers' money to ensure that it is properly invested. As private companies, bus companies also have to look after their financial interests.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My hon. Friend makes some compelling points, and my county of Lincolnshire, which is very rural, also suffers from the circumstances he describes. However, does he agree that bus companies—there are exceptions—too often follow Government or council grants, rather than try to stimulate their own services or provide services based on commercial needs?

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments—

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): On that point, if one is doing statistics, I have the largest constituency represented in the Chamber. I very much support my hon. Friend's point, but do not the Government need to change the legislation to ensure that local councils control the bus companies, rather than the bus companies being in control? A bus company can drop a route at the drop of a hat, and the local council has no control over the way the company runs that route. That is the origin of the problems we all face.

Brandon Lewis: I thank both my hon. Friends for their interventions. To take them one at a time, I agree that we need to look at more progressive and more flexible options for rural communities, and local authorities need to look at how we drive those forward. There are things the Government can do to encourage that, and I will touch on those in a moment, but we should certainly be nudging people and leading the way in pushing local authorities to look at different options.

There are options in rural areas where a bus route is simply not economically viable for a bus company and where the rural authority might not have the funding to subsidise that route for very low usage. It would be advantageous if people could use a concessionary pass more flexibly, whether in taxis or other forms of community transport. The Government could make such an option available; I will touch on that in a moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) is right about creating the flexibility to allow local authorities to push things forward.

The cuts in funding to rural authorities, which already receive less than urban authorities, combined with the additional cost of providing bus services in rural areas, mean that rural residents are at an even greater disadvantage than urban residents. A 2009 Leeds university study on the use of passes showed that—in Lancashire, for example—76% of passengers live in large urban areas. It also highlighted the difference in the use of passes, with 53% of pass holders in urban areas not using their passes during a five-year period, compared with 71% in village areas. That might be because of lack of bus availability in those rural areas or higher car ownership, but it is clear that the bus scheme pushes higher usage in urban areas. The point is that although rural areas might have lower usage, buses are vital to those who use them. If we are not careful, we will create a vicious circle.

The Commission for Rural Communities and others, including the Countryside Alliance, have highlighted the lack of transport as a key to social exclusion in the countryside, which is already particularly prevalent among young, elderly and disabled members of rural communities, and it can only get worse against a background of rising fuel costs.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise—perhaps he will implore the Minister to take this on board—that there is rural and there is rural, and we should not generalise too much? The point about social exclusion is far more relevant in isolated rural areas than in reasonably well populated rural areas. In places

[Simon Hart]

such as Meirionnydd in north Wales, we are talking about isolation, which is a very different matter, so I hope we can make a distinction between rurality and isolated rurality.

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and support his comments. One important issue on which we need to move forward, and one thing I will ask the Minister to work on with colleagues, is flexibility. In the spirit of true localism, we need to ensure that we achieve solutions that are suitable for an area, rather than just one size fits all, because what suits one place will not necessarily be perfect in another.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to say that some very good rural bus schemes have been set up by villages in my constituency, and I would highlight Broughton. Local communities, which know their areas best and know the demand, need that flexibility and the ability to come together to form solutions that will be responsive to their needs, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Brandon Lewis: I wholeheartedly agree.

Reduced or withdrawn bus services, which are quite likely in areas such as Norfolk, will make people more socially isolated, and make it harder for them to access employment, education and vital services, such as health care and retail facilities. Casework in my constituency shows that some of those issues are already prevalent. Any further loss of, or reduction in, rural bus services can only exacerbate the problem faced by rural communities, which have already been hit by rising fuel costs, increased reliance on cars and increasingly long and frequent car journeys.

We need to look at options for the future. The Government need to encourage and enable local authorities to provide alternative rural transport models. Where necessary, they should provide additional funding to kick-start that process, and there are exciting examples of that innovative approach across the country. Hon. Members have mentioned some, but let me give a few specific examples.

This September, Isle of Wight council joined bus operator Southern Vectis to form a community bus partnership that is the first of its kind in the country. That follows the scrapping of the council-owned Wightbus to save £175,000 a year. Working in conjunction with town and parish councils, voluntary drivers run some rural services. Southern Vectis provides off-peak school minibuses and driver training. The council has also allocated additional funding for community bus services. That arrangement avoids the problem of capital costs, which confronts many other community transport schemes, removing the risk from the voluntary sector. Before any union representatives complain, I should say that the service is not taking jobs away from existing drivers because it is an additional service, which ensures that existing services remain. As a result of that partnership working, Southern Vectis has won this year's transport operator of the year award. That is a great example of what can be done.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): I echo what my hon. Friend says. Will he admit, however, that there are problems that the council must tackle? There is the problem of people from off the island getting free transport on the island. People come into the area—I am sure this is true of most areas—for a holiday or for some other reason, but there is no income, or insufficient income, to the bus companies.

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend, who has first-hand experience of that development. Like him, I represent an area that is heavily used by tourists; in fact, it is the second most popular seaside tourist resort in the country. The system means that areas used by tourists can be further adversely affected. That is partly the result of the complicated arrangement in place for funding bus systems. One of the best things the Government have done—I pay credit to them for what they have done so far—is to simplify the system. Some organisations claim that at one point under the previous Government there were 22 different forms of funding for the bus system. We have got that down to three or four, and it would be a great success if the Government simplified things further over the next couple of years and introduced one funding system that was transparent and understandable to everybody and that sat with one Department.

Another new scheme serves rural Northamptonshire with a fleet of new low-floor minibuses. It allows passengers to book a seat by telephone or text or on the internet so that elderly or frail people can be picked up from home, while others are collected at village bus stops at a set time. That is Northamptonshire county council's excellent response to the need to save millions by reforming subsidised services. It is much better and more cost-effective, and it reacts much more to the needs of the user than a large, heavily subsidised bus going round villages when it is often empty or close to empty.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating the debate. He has just touched on a point we should all be aware of. We are in a coalition Government, and there are cuts taking place, which we support. In my experience as a Norfolk MP, however, the crucial thing about the local bus service, rather like the local post office, is that people use it or lose it. I am not here to defend the bus companies, but there is all too often public pressure to maintain a service, but when it is maintained, nobody uses it. We need to look at how these services are publicised and ensure that the public are made aware that it is not in the interests of either the Government or individual bus companies to maintain the kind of services that my hon. Friend mentioned. Such services merely go round and round the rural areas and are lucky if they get two or three people using them.

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I fully support what he says. It is important to find a way of ensuring that local authorities can be more flexible in how they work with the bus operators and other forms of community transport, so that they can allow for more cost-effective usage and be more responsive to local needs.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his points. A pilot scheme similar to that operated by Translink in Northern Ireland could be considered as an option. It identifies what services are needed through the community; for example, there may be a run on a Tuesday and a Thursday. Elected representatives work with communities, Translink and the bus companies. We are looking for flexibility. Does he agree that having flexibility within bus companies is the type of initiative needed to ensure that rural communities—isolated ones and others—can have the advantage of rural transport?

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We certainly need more flexibility in the system. Whether that is purely in relation to bus operators or we have a system that allows for community transport to be authorised, run and organised by local authorities, we need an approach that is more flexible than simply looking at the traditional system of buses. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) has mentioned, buses are not necessarily the most cost-effective solution or, indeed, the best answer for users. We need transport that can be used in rural areas by those with concessionary passes. As I was saying, demand-led services are vital if a rural network of transport is to exist. It is perhaps time to start talking about transport in the rural sense, rather then simply focusing on buses, which might not necessarily give the best service and use.

I am delighted that my county council in Norfolk has agreed to provide additional funding to look at and develop exactly that style of service. At the moment, more than 1,700 community transport organisations operate in England alone and offer transport services for people who are unable to access traditional public transport. It is vital that local authorities and organisations are empowered to provide alternative provision for residents.

An additional £10 million funding for community transport in rural areas is very, very welcome. However, the concessionary fares scheme does not apply to most community transport schemes because they operate under section 19 of the Transport Act 1985. Currently, only registered services run by community transport operators under a section 22 permit are eligible for the scheme. I was disappointed that, when I received a reply from the Minister to a recent written question, it indicated that the Government refuse to consider altering the legislation to widen the eligibility further and that they are leaving the matter at the discretion of local authorities. I ask the Government to look at that issue because dealing with it would be a positive step forward that could further encourage, develop and empower local decisions to be made by local councils and bus and other transport operators based on local need. I agree with the Select Committee on Transport's recommendation made in August this year:

> "If the Government genuinely wants to encourage the growth of the community transport sector, it should legislate to permit the use of the concessionary pass on a wider range of community transport services."

Mr Andrew Turner: Would it not be worth while in some way restricting the viability of the scheme, so that someone could arrive on the Isle of Wight from Northumberland and wave a flag? Some local use of these things is fine, but we do not want a national scheme.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point in the sense that the national scheme as it has been structured is effectively a bear trap left for this Government by the previous Government. Such a scheme is difficult to sustain and the issues surrounding it have opened up this debate, so that it has become a discussion about how concessionary passes operate. If we accept that a large contributory factor to the rural bus funding crisis is the increased cost of providing a concessionary fare scheme, we have to consider how that can be reformed.

It is absolutely right—I fully support this—that the coalition agreement insists that the Government will continue to keep the scheme. However, we need to find a way to fund it realistically for the long term. That means allowing councils to have enough flexibility to cover administration costs or offer innovative alternatives, some of which I, and colleagues, have touched on this morning.

Mr Spencer: Residents in Nottinghamshire, for example, may live close to the border of another county and may want to shop in Derbyshire, visit relatives in Yorkshire or travel to Leicestershire to gain employment. It is important that the scheme has the flexibility to allow such residents to move across county borders, so that they can gain access to relatives, employment or health services.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. In Great Yarmouth, residents from Lowestoft and across the Waveney constituency use the James Paget hospital and need transport to get there. However, there is a difference between that and the use of public transport for tourism. Legislation does give some protection in relation to that, but the system is so complicated that it is difficult to differentiate in some cases between tourism use and required local use. Were we to pursue that in the legislation, it might force the Government to become too deeply involved in the detail of a local system's provision.

We need to consider, or at least discuss, the potential for reform of the system, so that it is targeted on our poorest or most vulnerable pensioners. We also need to discuss whether the concessionary fare pass should be issued at 60 or according to the retirement age. If we do not have reform, concessionary passes could end up being worthless. For many pensioners in rural areas, having a concessionary pass is useful, but only if there is transport to use it on. Some bus operators have already made suggestions, such as having a flat-rate 50p charge. In some areas, concessionary pass holders are already being asked to pay a voluntary fee and a flat-rate charge per journey.

Dr Poulter: I accept my hon. Friend's point about the bus operators. Does he not also agree that the onus is on them to look at their services and proactively engage with local communities, particularly in rural areas, to make sure that they are more responsive to local needs? Far too often, certainly in Suffolk, the bus operators are not responsive to local needs. When a service is non-profitable, they cut the service and it is the frail elderly who lose out.

Brandon Lewis: There is an absolute need for operators to be looking locally and for local authorities to work with local communities and put further pressure on those companies. In Great Yarmouth, we have had

[Brandon Lewis]

examples of routes that have been considered for cancellation and, by working with the local authorities and the bus company, we have been able to restore a usable route that services residents. If a route is simply not economically viable, when money is scarce we need to consider alternative forms of transport that can provide the service that local residents need. That might not necessarily be a bus. We are talking about providing the transport service that is needed in a cost-effective way and that allows people to live their lives productively.

When I recently did an interview on BBC Radio Norfolk, I discussed the possibility raised by bus companies of having a 50p flat rate and an admin charge for getting a concessionary pass in the first place, and whether we should change the age of eligibility to retirement age rather than 60. I was pleasantly surprised because, despite expecting a barrage of criticism, we received some very positive responses. One resident said:

> "In regard to the recent news of the deficit we are facing with the bus pass I heard you on Radio Norfolk and thought your opinions echoed mine and I am sure many more. I would be more than happy to pay 50p each trip which would more than cover the debt."

Cornwall county council, for example, has called for legislative changes to allow pass holders to make a small payment for each journey. It has written to all the county's MPs to ask them to lobby for such a change.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend, who makes exactly the point that I want to make, on securing the debate. During the summer, in meetings in village halls around my constituency, there was universal support for the idea that some people could contribute a flat fee of 50p or £1. I accept that, for people living in poverty and on mean-tested benefits, that would be too much, but there is strong support for consideration to be given to the introduction of a flat fee. In the spirit of localism, the Minister should enable councils to be pathfinders if they want to do so. In this age of austerity, we are enabling many councils to be pathfinders and to work with residents and stakeholders to find sustainable ways of funding vital public services. What better example and lead could the Government provide than to enable certain local authorities to pilot flat fees where there is overwhelming support from residents?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is right, particularly in relation to overwhelming desire from local residents to see a service continue. We need to be more flexible.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing what is undoubtedly an important debate. Following on from that point, in the past local authorities put in seed funding to get rural transport services and rural bus services up and running. If they were successful they carried on, on a commercial level. We must give local authorities extra powers to put some of the money from a flat fee back into the service and, working with the community, to ensure full access to services. It is down to local authorities to work with the community, but they need the power to be able to do so.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend's contribution again highlights the need for flexibility and true localism. My colleagues and I across Norfolk work together on a range of issues. We know that there are vast differences across our county. Even in my constituency of Great Yarmouth, I have areas of dense population and urban areas in Great Yarmouth town itself, as well as sparsely populated rural areas in some villages. Norfolk, from the centre of Norwich to extreme rural areas, is a good example of how needs, desires and requirements differ. Flexibility is needed.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): As a fellow Norfolk MP, it seems appropriate to pick up on that point. I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this issue, and the attendance in the Chamber indicates the support that he has. Does he agree that we are witnessing a perfect storm? The combination of our elderly population, the marginality in rural areas and energy prices goes to the heart of how Governments through the ages have under-recognised rural deprivation, as the indices they use tend to under-measure rural deprivation. The last time I looked, I discovered that ethnicity was a major driver for Government measurement of deprivation. Norfolk has a very low incidence of ethnicity and a very high incidence of rural deprivation. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that. Does he feel, as I do, a huge public yearning to solve this issue with a bit more flexibility, perhaps with a voucher model in some areas? In general, Government schemes are not very good at delivering what the customer wants. If we empower people by giving them the money that we currently spend, we might find that the public, through the big society model, find their own solutions.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a strong point. To highlight his point about the elderly population, in the next 15 years in Great Yarmouth alone it is estimated that the number of residents of pensionable age will increase by 35%. Given the rural community across Norfolk, that figure highlights how important access to transport is for people of that generation. As I touched on earlier, access is also important for young people in rural areas, where there are issues around deprivation and where we are trying to stimulate and grow the economy and increase youth employment.

A flat-rate charge, which was mentioned, would raise approximately £5 million a year in Norfolk alone. That would safeguard all rural services and the wider network across the county. However, the Department for Transport thus far seems to have adopted quite a negative response to that suggestion. The Department has written to all councils saying that

> "requesting voluntary donations to protect a particular route,"

is illegal, and doubts whether they are, in reality, voluntary. The basis of that is that the claim of a threat of removal of a service, without a donation, is tantamount to coercion. There is a very fine line to be drawn.

Other options include making the bus pass liable to an annual fee. A study by Leeds university found that 56% of pass holders did not use it over a five-week period. I have met numerous people recently who have raised the fact that, although they are of an age to have a bus pass and do have one, they never actually use it. The administration cost of issuing passes that are not required, therefore, could be saved. Should the taxpayer provide concessionary passes to those who are still in full-time employment? I made the point earlier about whether the pass is issued at the correct age. I urge the Minister to extend the validity of cards from five years to 10, so that county councils such as Norfolk, whose renewals are due in 2013, do not face the cost of renewing the concessionary passes. For Norfolk county council, that cost is approximately £250,000. That could be better spent on providing rural transport services.

The coalition Government were left with a formal bear trap—a system of transport that is simply not sustainable. The Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport have both had to deal with a complicated and convoluted form of funding that many organisations have struggled to understand fully. I have a request for Norfolk in particular, but for rural areas in general. We appreciate that money is scarce. As much as we would like to call for the money—the £6 million shortfall in Lancashire, and approximately £4 million in Kent, Norfolk, Devon, Hampshire and other counties this year—we appreciate that the Department for Transport, or the Treasury, does not have the ability to wave a magic wand and deliver such a response. Although county councils might not appreciate this, I suspect that if they felt there was some certainty in the years ahead, they would be able to find ways of dealing with the situation in the short term.

There was a feeling in some county councils, such as Norfolk, that there must simply have been a mistake in the funding formula this year, to lead to such variations from previous years. Sorting out funding in the future does not just require a magic wand. It is vital to ensure access for rural areas and to prevent further rural deprivation and poverty. We need to find a better balance of funding. At present, the system is overly beneficial to urban areas and hugely detrimental to rural areas. Will the Minister find a better balance next year to ensure that rural areas, as I and a range of hon. Members have mentioned, are not so adversely affected in the years ahead? With an ageing population in particular, this cannot be tolerated. It will be detrimental to youth employment in rural areas, to economic growth in such areas, to families and to our country.

Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. This is a huge issue in my post bag, as I am sure it is for hon. Members across Norfolk. I agree completely with his point about flexibility. It is not just about the amount of money that we are spending; it is also about how that money is spent. How will flexibility help to deliver more on-demand bus services and better integration with rail services? Two rail services go through the South West Norfolk constituency—the Fen line and the Norwich-Cambridge line. There is an opportunity to integrate those services better with local transport.

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. As I said earlier, we need to ask the Department to find ways of allowing local authorities to be more flexible, having a national structure through which local authorities can allow people to use their concessionary pass on other forms of transport. More forms of public transport, more community transport options, allowing local authorities to be more flexible and—I appreciate that I am moving beyond the subject of the debate—even moving beyond focusing only on buses, may go a long way to solve this problem. As we have heard, in some very remote areas of low population, bus usage may not be the most cost-effective way of providing transport. We need to allow local authorities to be able to use funding to allow people to use concessionary travel passes, and have access to other forms of transport that may deliver a better demand-driven service that is also more cost-effective for the taxpayer.

The *Eastern Daily Press* and the *Great Yarmouth Mercury*, two excellent bastions of journalism in Norfolk, have been superb in supporting the fair fares campaign, which in just a few days has already garnered more than 2,500 signatures. I call on everybody across Norfolk, who has access to the internet or who can get hold of a copy of either of these excellent newspapers, to join the petition and let us have their support in moving forward to get fairer funding for transport services across Norfolk. I know colleagues have similar views about their own rural areas.

Will the Minister, for next year's funding round, find more ways to simplify the system? It would be ideal for the system to be planted in one Department in a clear, transparent system that people can understand, to allow concessionary passes to be used beyond the traditional methods, and for local authorities to have more flexibility to provide better, different and more progressive forms of transport that can be more demand-driven and cost-effective for the taxpayer. That would protect rural transport services for the future, and for the use of everybody.

11.39 am

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Caton. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who, in the 17 months that he has been in this Parliament, has put the "great" back into Great Yarmouth.

Rural bus services were an issue before the general election and have continued to be so in my constituency of wonderful South Derbyshire—I have put the "south" into South Derbyshire. The difficulty we find in our rural areas is that we can take a bus out on a Tuesday but we have to wait until Thursday to get the bus back. That is not conducive to family life, I find.

I ask the Minister to take on board many of the points made by my hon. Friend and, in particular, the issues of flexibility and whether we can expand opportunities. Shropshire has brought in community buses to act as feeders to the main bus routes. In one village on my patch, Scropton, we have had round-table meetings with three different commercial bus providers. None of them can make that route work but we could find a way for the county council to put the money into feeder, community transport buses if the section 19 arrangement could be changed to allow for that. Will the Minister be kind enough to look at the pilots around the country, because rural, isolated parts of Derbyshire provide an opportunity for the money to be used better, which is what the coalition Government ought to be all about? The coalition should be about freedom, accessibility and using public money wisely.

[Heather Wheeler]

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and I sincerely hope that the Minister will be able to come up with some excellent answers. I shall stay through to the bitter end of 12.30 to listen to those brilliant answers. If he can sort out the bus issue in Scropton, he would make my life so much happier.

11.41 am

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak on rural bus services. The issue is apposite because on 26 September Northumberland county council issued the report of its bus subsidy working group. I endorse the all-party work, led by Councillor Gordon Castle, to bring together a proper and legitimate way forward for the bus services of Northumberland. The problems of Great Yarmouth presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) are common to us all and endemic in all our counties and constituencies. We have a common will and desire to change the policies of the past, which have seen a gradual decline in bus services, to the detriment of people in rural areas. I hope and pray that the Minister will take on board and progress the excellent suggestions arising from today's timely and proper debate.

I represent the second largest constituency in this country, and rural bus services are clearly an important factor. Without question, the Hadrian's wall bus service provided by the Hadrian's Wall Heritage company and Northumberland county council provides a great service for tourism. Not only rural bus services are at stake, however, and I do not want us to fall into the trap of being champions solely of those suffering from rural fuel poverty and poor rural bus services, because those matters are also common to the market towns and villages in our constituencies. Those areas are not fundamentally rural, but include 5,000 or 3,000-people towns that are absolutely dependent on bus services. All of us could highlight individual areas of rural bus poverty—if that is the proper expression—that we could describe, note and champion, but the little towns and villages also need support. That is what I particularly want to discuss.

I have the great fortune—I express that passionately—to have three particular bus champions in my constituency who regularly fill my postbag. In Prudhoe, I wish to cite Robert Forsyth and Amanda Carr, who promote the cause of buses and are, quite rightly, on the case of bus companies such as the euphemistically named Go North East, which does not seem to go very far or to continue to go very often—it would be well named, if only it fulfilled its name. They champion the desire of local people to have buses that support them in local villages. The *Hexham Courant*, my local paper, has supported Mrs Carr. Her mother and mother-in-law try to take the children to and pick them up from school using the local bus service but, if it goes, they will not be able to do so, so continuing to work will be impossible and there will be huge difficulties on the way ahead.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is making some good points. People often think that rural bus services are a bit of a luxury—some have cars sitting in their drives but choose to use bus passes because they have them—but they underestimate the poverty and the number of those struggling on low incomes who use the buses to go to work, school or hospital. In Cornwall, we have only one acute hospital for the whole county, which is more than 100 miles long. CAB Cornwall, the citizens advice bureaux, has done some excellent work showing the cost to society of the lack of affordable access to transport. High numbers of people miss doctor or hospital appointments, which is detrimental not only to personal health but to the whole of society because of the costs of them not accessing such vital services.

Guy Opperman: As always, my hon. Friend makes a telling point, and I endorse entirely what she said.

Certain organisations are stepping into the breach, and I would like to support the work of Adapt, which has stepped in to provide an essential public service but has gone further than traditional countryside bus provision. It targets those who need the service by operating a dial-a-ride scheme, picking up local residents from their home. The service has proved extremely successful and invaluable to those with young children and to the elderly, who felt that their access to buses was limited under the old, more traditional provision. I totally endorse the dial-a-ride system as the way forward for traditional rural bus services that are failing to provide.

I want to finish with two particular points, which relate to what the Government can do for us, touching first on integration and secondly on the degree of control that Government and local councils have over bus services. I represent a constituency that is entirely in Northumberland, but Durham is below me—it is good to see my neighbour in the Chamber, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass)—Cumbria is to the west, Newcastle is to the east, and the bus services have to integrate. I also have Scotland to the north and, although we do not have an awful lot of bus services to Scotland, there should still be a degree of integration.

The sadness is that there is no integration between individual bus services operating in one county and the next—that must come from the Government giving guidance. We have the bizarre situation of the bus companies literally not talking to each other, let alone planning individual services with each other.

To go further, we rightly have a degree of competition, with bus companies able to provide local bus services, but we can have the bizarre situation of two bus companies competing for the same journey, with the result that neither can make a profit or provide a service and we end up with no bus company in that area. The Government must be able to find some way to enforce a degree of integration when the ultimate contract is awarded to a bus company, so that the parties and partners work together and not against each other.

Simon Hart: To reinforce that point, I have an example for the Minister. If I am a concessionary pass holder in Wales, I cannot use my pass in England, but if I am one in England, I can use my pass in Wales—there are one or two exceptions in north Wales and the border counties. That situation displays a ludicrous lack of foresight. If the Minister can square that with the Welsh Assembly, he would be doing an even better job than he is doing at the moment.

Guy Opperman: I am grateful for the example. We could all provide examples of our bus companies and the respective counties in charge of bus services not working together. There are good examples: we have a partnership in Northumberland with the Newcastle system, which works very well, but it is an isolated example, sadly. I urge that degree of integration. Surely that is localism in its purest form—the degree to which local organisations talk to each other, rather than existing in a silo, which has been the case for so long.

I finish on the point I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth. The Local Government Association is in broad terms seeking greater control of bus companies. We have the Government as the ultimate provider, which is passed down to county councils, and the county council then abrogates the responsibility to individual bus companies. The bus company then runs the show. It can stop a service, or do whatever it likes with it. The Government must give guidance to the local authority so that it works with the bus company, and the company does not stop a service just because it does not like it after the contract has been awarded.

Mr Andrew Turner: Will my hon. Friend consider a problem that applies to the Isle of Wight? I do not accuse Northumberlanders of this, but in some areas—mine is one—there is a bus monopoly. In my constituency there is a complete monopoly, and one bus company covers the whole island. There is no entry, and that should be considered.

Guy Opperman: I now give way again.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The point that my hon. Friend made about the Government communicating with councils is key. Whether on integration or the funding formula, one of the biggest issues for North Yorkshire county council was that it was landed with a £5 million deficit with no communication from the Department for Communities and Local Government. I urge him to press his point, and to press the Minister to bring county councils that have been particularly affected down to London now, to ensure that the next settlement is better organised.

Guy Opperman: It is hard for me to improve on the last two points. Both hon. Friends made good and telling contributions. Greater localism, which surely brings all parties together, is a way forward. The individual silo system, with individual counties and companies working alone, has existed for far too long. It is for the common good and ultimately that of the Government to bring everyone together, bash their heads together, and get a better system.

11.52 am

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Caton. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) on securing the debate, which is so important to so many of us. As my colleague, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), said, we have exactly the same problems, although there is a border between us. The problem is huge in North West Durham, and in a huge rural area, which many hon. Members here represent.

When I talked to my local authority about the problem, it said that it took a £400 million hit in cuts, with a 28% cut in local transport. It has simply passed that 28% cut across to local bus services and subsidies. I am sure that some hon. Members here will be in a worse situation, but some communities in my constituency have no buses on Sundays, some have none after 6 pm, and some have only one bus a week. Some communities have no buses at all. That has hit the elderly, the disabled and, particularly in my constituency, the young. We have not heard much about young people, but they tell me that my county has cut all home-to-school transport to the absolute legal limit. It has cut all home-to-school transport to faith schools, which has had a massive impact in my constituency, and all home-to-school or home-to-college transport for those aged 16 and above.

Heather Wheeler: I am glad that the hon. Lady raised school transport. Derbyshire county council is holding massive consultation on the issue. Some of my villages are astride roads such as the A50 and the A38, which are major roads, and the thought of 11, 12 and 13-year-olds trying to cross them because they are on a route as the crow flies is bizarre. I thank her for bringing up education transport.

Pat Glass: I agree with everything that the hon. Lady says. In parts of my constituency, as the nights are getting darker, young people from age 11 must walk home along roads that are unsafe because they do not have footpaths or street lighting.

Julian Smith: The problem also affects love. Cat Walker came to my surgery a few weeks ago and said that it had taken her four hours to get to see her boyfriend. He lives in Harrogate, she in Skipton. The problem is having a detrimental effect on young people's love interest.

Pat Glass: I was coming to that—not exactly love, but young people's prospects. They tell me that they are being forced to take courses at local schools and colleges, when that is not the right choice for their future. The problem is having a long-term impact on young people's relationships and their future, which also has an impact on society generally and the economy.

As with everything, some people are never pleased. I have had constituents at my surgeries with real issues about education, isolation and so on, but I have also had constituents who obtained many signatures complaining that the local bus no longer passes their house and they must walk half a mile to the nearest bus stand. It is difficult to sympathise with them.

There are issues concerning deregulation and monopoly. In parts of my constituency, there is one bus company and it can do what it likes. I had experience of that recently, and had to bully and threaten the chief executive of the local bus company to join me at a village public meeting. The purpose was not to have a go at the company, which I accept must make a profit, but to enable people to make constructive suggestions about how to provide local transport and how to deal with problems of the sort that we have heard about today.

The problem will affect us all, and it is incumbent on us to do something about it. An elderly couple, who are close to me and who had a car, were reasonably well off and things were fine. They moved back to a village in Durham where they had grown up. The gentleman had a bad stroke, but things were still fine because his wife

[Pat Glass]

could drive, so they could get about to the shops and to hospital appointments. She was then struck down with macular degeneration and is going blind, so she cannot drive. They are in a dreadful situation. They have a lovely bungalow that they cannot sell because of the economy. They cannot get to the shops, and the bus that used to run within a reasonable distance has now stopped. In a short time, that couple, who reflect many of us and our constituents and whose situation was relatively okay, found themselves in serious difficulties. Whatever the Minister does—whether on flexibility and funding, flexibility and regulation, or flexibility of local transportation—something must be done, and quickly.

11.58 am

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) on securing the debate. It has been worth while, but we will see how worth while when we hear the Minister's answers. I will speak briefly to give him as much time as possible to expand on the points that have been raised, particularly the free bus pass, which I shall say more about in a moment.

[MR LEE SCOTT *in the Chair*]

It was a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Caton, and it is now a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Scott. There has been a lightening transformation.

Barrow and Furness is a semi-rural constituency in Cumbria and it has been hit incredibly hard, as have many other rural areas. In my patch so far, we have campaigned for a temporary and partial reprieve for some services, but a great question mark hangs over them, as is the case in many of the areas that have been referred to. I grew up in the red republic of south Yorkshire, as it was then, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Mr Blunkett) was the firebrand leader of Sheffield city council, and one could go anywhere in south Yorkshire for 10p, or for 2p for juniors such as I was. Back in those days, we did not anticipate Norfolk county council joining the agitation about buses, but that is a sign of our changed times.

There is great consensus on some of the points raised today, and Government Members might wish to see me as someone who said what he really thought. Government Members are polite people who are looking to their future in Parliament. The triple whammy effect was mentioned, and it is being severely felt. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth was polite when he explained that when he looked at the settlement for Norfolk he thought it must have been a mistake. I suggest, however, that it was not an unintentional mistake, that there is clear intent by the Government to impose cuts that the Opposition believe go too far too fast, and that real, lasting damage will be caused to communities.

Mr Andrew Turner: I understand what the hon. Gentleman says, but he must not conclude from our criticism on one issue that we would criticise on others. I would like to see where he would make cuts in place of those areas in which he wants us to get some balance.

John Woodcock: I am not alone in my criticisms, or in suggesting that some cuts have gone too far and that more funding should be made available. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth mentioned additional funds to kick-start rural initiatives. That is an interesting idea and I wait to hear whether the Minister will take it up and where he will find the money.

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support in some parts so far. The key point in my closing remarks concerned looking at the balance of funding, not overall funding. We must deal with our economic deficit, but we must also look at the balance between urban and rural areas.

Part of the problem suffered in rural areas might not have been as severe, or might not even have existed, if the legislation passed by the previous Government in 2000 and updated in 2008—that on quality contracts, effectively franchising agreements—had been used. Those contracts have not been implemented by any local authorities, despite it being agreed that that would be a good move forward. That may be because the previous Government created such a convoluted and complicated system that no one could work their way through it, which highlights my request to find a better way to simplify the system so that some of the quality contracts can proceed. That may be part of the solution and provide the flexibility that many of us are looking for. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will comment on that.

John Woodcock: That is an interesting point. We thought that quality bus contracts were an important move forward and they were successful in some areas.

Brandon Lewis: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I want to clarify the fact that, according to the House of Commons Library, not a single contract has been implemented thus far. I am not sure what area he is referring to when he says that they have been successful.

John Woodcock: There have been areas where quality bus contracts have made a difference.

Hon. Members: Where?

Pat Glass: Tyne and Wear.

John Woodcock: My hon. Friend says Tyne and Wear, and I am sure that the Minister, who has inherited this situation, will tell us where the contracts have been a success. There was progress in some areas, but we need to go further. I shall move on to that in a moment.

Some areas have not been mentioned in the debate, but they face severe cuts, and some local authorities, such as Cambridgeshire and Hartlepool, are threatening to withdraw funding from all supported bus services. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) set out some of the problems in her area. Elsewhere in the north, Teesdale faces the prospect of having no buses at all from Christmas. That will be devastating for those affected, who often rely on buses as their only way to get around, be it for work or leisure, or to get the basic essentials. We have heard different perspectives on what the solution should be for such areas, and I ask the Minister to say more about the transport and services that we as a country are prepared to support.

Guy Opperman: I have been listening very closely to the past eight minutes of the hon. Gentleman's speech. Prior to that, we were having a cross-party debate in which all Members agreed that things could be done. I accept that we are in an age of austerity and that individual councils, whatever their political make-up, have to make big decisions and face difficult problems. Thus far, however, the shadow Minister has solely addressed the lack of funding—which is, of course, a difficult issue—but he has not said what he would do on behalf of the Opposition. That is what I would like to hear, perhaps in relation to comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) and other Members.

John Woodcock: In that case, I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman will be sticking around in the debate.

There is a debate about what kind of transport service we should have. I understand the point made by the hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) before he had to leave about "use it or lose it", but equally, the point has been made that some rural areas will never experience the mass usage of public transport seen in more urban or built-up areas. We should not say as a country that because some services are not frequently filled to the brim, we should be prepared to remove them. We want greater focus on dial-a-ride schemes such as those mentioned today, and we must find alternatives to running large buses that are never full through rural communities—such a system is not satisfactory on cost grounds because, as the commercial operators of those companies say, the cost per passenger is often sky high. Neither does it satisfy us on environmental grounds, so we must be bold in enabling communities to look at alternatives.

One key area that the Government should explore concerns empowering local authorities and handing greater control to local areas to fund and support the services they want. Funding and support from central Government are critical to that, and the scale of the cuts is having a devastating effect in some areas. There is frustration in many parts of the country, be they rural or urban, about the inability of local authorities to access all the disparate funding streams that go into supporting buses, and at the way that services are contracted. In areas such as Barrow and Furness, some services within the town and elsewhere are commercially viable, while others require support. It is time to look again at how we are forced to contract out those services and cannot mix up the provision and procurement that currently goes to private providers. When the Minister rises to his feet, I would like to hear what he thinks of our idea of integrated transport authorities, and about what can be done to enable swift moves towards that and give local communities more authority.

We need to address the issue of free bus passes. I am fascinated by the idea that that was a bear trap left by the previous Government—the idea is that new Ministers have fallen into it and been trapped—because I am sure that before the election I heard the Leader of the Opposition, now the Prime Minister, accusing his Labour opponents of lying when they suggested that there could be a change or a threat to the free bus pass for the over-60s as installed by the Labour Government. Now we see Government Members queuing up to say that it is wrong and should go.

Brandon Lewis: I am sorry to take up more time, and I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's generosity in giving way.

I want to make it clear that I did not hear a single Member talk about getting rid of concessionary bus passes. We should get that on the record. The bear trap was mentioned particularly with reference to the structure and style of financing for the transport subsidies that go across bus services. The concessionary transport issue requires a wider debate, but not a single Member here made the statement that the hon. Gentleman has just attributed to us.

John Woodcock: I say to the hon. Gentleman and to other hon. Members who have stayed to the end of the debate that a free bus pass is a free bus pass and a promise is a promise. There are other areas where promises have clearly been made and immediately broken. If the hon. Gentleman wants to go out to the country and say, "Yes, we did promise that this would remain free to the over-60s, but that is no longer going to be the case. When we accused our opponents of lying when they said that we wanted or were threatening to take away the free bus pass, that was all just a smokescreen and the sort of thing that you say before elections, and actually we were planning to do that all along because it does not make sense," I will welcome his being honest and doing that. Let us see how he gets on in his constituency.

Brandon Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Woodcock: No, I will not give way again, because I said that I wanted to give the Minister time to reply. I am trying to wrap up my contribution now.

I hope that the Minister will answer all the very well-put points that have been made, many of which were to be in my speech, but which I have not repeated because there is such consensus on some issues across the divide. Will the Minister guarantee that the free bus pass for the over-60s will remain for the lifetime of this Parliament as both parties clearly guaranteed to the British people before the election?

12.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Norman Baker): I think the hon. Gentleman means three parties.

Mr Scott, it is good to see you in the Chair, given your transport expertise. We are delighted to have you here. I thank the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), my coalition colleague, for raising the issue of rural bus services and securing time to allow us to debate these important issues. There has been a very good turnout. I welcome that. It is helpful for Members of Parliament to make it clear that they do value bus services and, in particular, rural bus services. The tone of the debate has been positive and constructive. Hon. Members made a number of very good points, which I will try to respond to in the time available.

[Norman Baker]

I know from my own constituency that buses are a lifeline for many people in rural areas, providing access to jobs, schools, health care and social activities. Good bus services contribute to both the Government's key transport priorities: creating growth and cutting carbon. By providing an attractive alternative to the car, we can not only cut carbon but, at the same time, unclog the congestion that can choke off local economies. That applies particularly to towns.

We are committed to reducing the budget deficit, as has been said and as hon. Members have accepted across the Chamber today. Every sector has to play its part. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), will remember that the Labour party was committed to £44 billion of cuts as well. We must recognise that every sector has to play its part. However, we have a duty to pay particular attention to those who are most reliant on buses, such as the people referred to by the hon. Member for South West Durham—

Pat Glass: North West Durham.

Norman Baker: North West Durham. Well, I am sure that there are some people in south-west Durham with similar issues.

Central to all this is our commitment, as part of the comprehensive spending review, to continue our financial subsidy of bus operators. Bus service operators grant remains untouched for this financial year. Notice of 18 months or thereabouts was given of the changes. The 20% savings are to be introduced from next April. That 20% reduction represents a good deal for bus operators and passengers when compared with reductions to budgets elsewhere. Although it will inevitably have some effect on fares and services, I have been assured by operators that that will be only at the margins. Indeed, after the spending review decision was announced, the industry said that it felt able to absorb the reduction in bus service operators grant without raising fares or cutting services.

Pat Glass: With respect, we are not talking about the change to bus service operators grant. That is yet to come. We are talking about the impact of the cuts to local authority budgets. The situation is bad enough, but next year it will get far worse with the change to bus service operators grant.

Norman Baker: If I am allowed to make some progress, I will of course address that point. I am trying to structure my response. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth, whose debate it is, referred to these issues: bus service operators grant, local tendered services, support from local authorities and concessionary fares. I will deal with each of those. The point that I am making on the first one is that it is not an issue that should concern hon. Members, because the bus operators themselves have said that the reduction can be absorbed. Therefore, BSOG is not a problem in terms of the services provided.

John Woodcock: Just to be clear, is the Minister saying that he is clear that there will be no further reductions in services as a result of the reduction in BSOG next year?

Norman Baker: I am saying what I was told by the Confederation of Passenger Transport. Immediately after the spending review, it indicated that in general terms it felt able to absorb the reduction in BSOG without an effect on services or fares. That is what it said. I am happy to provide the quote if the hon. Gentleman wants to see it.

It should also be recognised that, even in places such as Norfolk, about two thirds of journeys are on commercial services and are therefore unaffected by what local authorities decide in relation to their own budgets.

Let me turn now to concessionary travel and say first very plainly that, even in these times of austerity measures, the coalition Government are firmly committed to protecting the concessionary bus travel scheme. That was made clear in the coalition agreement, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer reconfirmed that commitment in the spending review. The scheme is of huge benefit to about 11.5 million people, allowing free off-peak travel anywhere in England. That generous concession provides older and disabled people with greater freedom, independence and a lifeline to their community. It enables access to facilities both within and outside their local area and helps them to keep in touch with family and friends. Travel to visit popular tourist destinations can also bring benefits to the wider economy.

The Government are aware of how precious the benefit is to older and disabled people, which is why we are focusing our efforts on assisting local authorities to find efficiencies through reforms to administrative arrangements for the scheme, rather than cutting back on the entitlement. For the avoidance of doubt, the free bus pass is here to stay.

Mr Andrew Turner: My hon. Friend is quite correct in what he quotes. I fell into the bear trap that the Labour party left for me, and so did my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, as far as I can see.

John Woodcock: We gave these people free bus travel.

Mr Turner: I was wrong to support the scheme, but I supported it and I will support it for the rest of this Parliament. What happens then is a matter that we will have to debate and develop.

Norman Baker: I can say to my hon. Friend to be helpful that a number of well-meaning people who are very committed to bus services have raised similar points to the one that he has raised. Those points have been noted and passed both to the Department for Transport and elsewhere in Government. However, we are clear about the commitment that we have made to the free bus pass, and that is not going to change.

I should at this stage pick up a point made by the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth about trying to save money on administration in relation to the bus pass. That is right. We need to consider those types of saving. That is one reason why we were supportive of the idea of moving the administration from districts to counties, which saves considerable costs in the administration of the bus pass.

Only one small change has been made to the entitlement to concessionary fares: the age of eligibility has been increased in line with the changes taking place to the state pension age. That is right, as people are living longer, staying healthy longer and tending to stay in work until later in life. That change started in April 2010, just before the last general election, so local authorities are already making savings as a result. The change will assist with the financial sustainability of the scheme, while reserving the benefits of the bus pass for those with the greater need.

What has not changed at all—this is an important point—is that operators should be reimbursed for concessionary bus travel only on a no better, no worse-off basis. That is in primary legislation introduced by the previous Government. Nothing that this Government have done has changed that at all. Almost a year ago, the Department for Transport published revised guidance to local authorities to support them in determining their arrangements with bus companies, to make sure that they are no better and no worse off. I made that clear in my recent letter to the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Mr Bellingham) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), both of whom came to see me to talk about bus services in the county.

In a report published in May, the Competition Commission strongly commended the guidance issued by my Department, since it helps local authorities to take account of the impacts that the concessionary travel scheme can have on commercial pricing policies. The commission says that it hopes that the guidance will be followed to the greatest extent possible. In fact, the majority of local authorities are now using the guidance and should be reaping the financial benefits of taking it on board. I stress, however, that it is entirely a matter for them whether they use the guidance or not. There is no compulsion to do so. The only compulsion is the one that existed in legislation introduced by the previous Government to ensure that bus companies are no better and no worse off from operating the concessionary fares scheme. The guidance can be a useful starting point for negotiation between bus operators and local authorities and, so far this year, more than half of the appeals lodged by operators have been withdrawn—a significant improvement on previous years.

I remind Members that our funding for bus travel does not stop at concessionary travel reimbursement and bus operator subsidy. We have also provided almost £47 million to local transport authorities and bus operators to purchase 542 low-carbon buses across England, through our green bus fund. I would also like to refer to our new £560 million local sustainable transport fund, which this Government have introduced. There have been 39 successful bids in tranche 1, 25 of which have included bus-based elements to help bus travel locally.

Turning to the third element, I recognise that the recent local authority settlement has been challenging. There is no doubt about that. I have heard the argument that the distribution method used at the time does not reflect the particular circumstances facing each local council. That has been brought into sharp relief now that, since April, all funding for the statutory concessionary travel scheme has been provided as part of the settlement from the Department for Communities and Local Government. I should point out, however, that last summer's consultation by that Department provided an opportunity to influence the final distribution method for the first two years of the spending review period. The overall funding then set was deemed by DCLG to be sufficient to enable local authorities to deliver effective local services, while ensuring that authorities do not set excessive council tax increases. Councils now have another opportunity to make their voices heard. DCLG is consulting on the broad options for a new way of funding local government, based on business rates retention.

The Government are clear that any changes must protect the interests of local taxpayers and the vulnerable, be fair for all councils and encourage growth. Councils that are more deprived—I accept the point that has been made about the definition of deprivation—will continue to receive central Government support. We recognise, however, that it may be possible to improve the way local council spending on concessionary travel reimbursement is treated in allocating local government resources. That is why, following my meeting in April with the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth, my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk, the hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson), my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Simon Wright), and the hon. Members for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) and for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), I wrote to the Minister for Housing and Local Government on 20 July about the way formula grant is calculated, the relative needs formula for concessionary travel, the so-called floor-damping mechanism, and the local government resource review. That is why the consultation considers whether to review the relative needs formulae for concessionary travel when establishing the baseline for local government funding from 2013-14 onwards.

Sarah Newton: I welcome the review of local government funding formulae. One area of reimbursement that the Minister has not mentioned, and on which I hope he will give an assurance, relates to parts of the country that welcome lots of tourists but are not, at the moment, reimbursed for the cost of honouring concessionary fares. Can he assure us that the review will consider that?

Norman Baker: I can give an assurance only that, first, that point was made to me in a meeting with Norfolk MPs, and secondly, that it has been reflected in comments that I have passed on to DCLG. I am happy to share the reply that I received from the Minister for Housing and Local Government. He confirmed that he had received the letter and that, in his view, the new business rate retention system is likely to address Norfolk's concerns. That was the official response from DCLG and the Minister thinks that that is part of the answer. There is recognition, at least, from DCLG that Members in Norfolk have a legitimate concern about the matter, and it is therefore being factored, I think, into the Department's thinking.

Let me now turn to reductions in tendered bus services, which in England comprise about 22% of bus services, while the rest are commercially provided. As I have said, the recent local government finance settlement has been challenging, but I am still disappointed that in some areas local councils have responded by taking the axe to local bus services in a rather unimaginative way. This hits particularly hard in rural areas where supported services make up a higher share of the total than in metropolitan areas. I am naturally concerned when I hear that vulnerable people with few other transport

[Norman Baker]

choices have lost their only bus service, or that children have reduced public transport access to the school of their choice. It would seem that there is also an impact on people's love lives and on cats, but perhaps I should keep away from cats.

Some councils, such as Cambridgeshire, have unfortunately taken an almost slash-and-burn approach to bus services, while others, such as East Riding, where the percentage cuts are in single figures, have been much more considerate and careful in their decisions. There is therefore a big difference—this is part of localism—between the responses of individual councils. People are now empowered to ask why their council has made cuts in their area when similar cuts have not been made across the border. I hope that people will start picking up on these differences and challenge their councillors accordingly. That is part of the answer to the point that the hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) made about North Yorkshire, because the position in North Yorkshire is very different from that in, for example, East Riding.

I was encouraged to read in a recent press release by Norfolk council that it has been able to make significant savings this year with

"very little disruption to bus services."

Another example is Dorset, which I understand is making savings of up to £1 million this year through an innovative procurement model. That is something that I am examining to see whether there are lessons that can be rolled out to other councils throughout the country.

I am interested in the point made by the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) about feeder services in Shropshire. Section 22 community transport services can qualify for concessionary travel, so it is possible for them to be included in a proper arrangement for a planned bus network.

I am also keen that local authorities make the most efficient use of their resources, whether that means combining adult social care transport with patient and school transport, or providing more flexible forms of public transport in areas where commercial services are not available. In Cheltenham, for example, Gloucestershire county council has replaced a costly subsidised bus service with a route operated by a community transport group, which integrates school transport in the mornings and afternoons with a scheduled timetable open to the public in between. I think that that is the sort of initiative that the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth was suggesting might be applied more widely.

On community transport eligibility, as I have mentioned, section 22 services qualify. Section 19 services do not, because the Department has long held the view that, because they are on-demand services and available only to specific groups of people, it would not be fair to extend concessionary fare eligibility to them. It could also undermine existing tendered or commercial services. They qualify, however, for bus service operators grants, so there is support.

I am conscious of the time, but let me pick up one or two of the points that have been raised. The hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) made a point about integration across counties. Local authorities have powers to work together with operators of commercial services across boundaries to integrate timetables. That is done in some areas, such as Oxford and Sheffield, so the powers are there and were, in fact, reinforced in the Local Transport Act 2008. It is up to local authorities to use the powers that they have. There are no quality contracts in place at the moment. The legislation exists to allow them to be formed. There are statutory quality partnerships, which is perhaps what the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness was discussing. If local authorities want to avail themselves of the powers in the 2008 Act, they can do so. Some of the legislation is slightly complicated. In fact, when I was in opposition, I wanted to go further, in line with some of the comments made by Government Members during today's debate, but that did not find favour with the previous Government.

The Competition Commission has produced this week its provisional remedies for the bus market. The Department for Transport may need to look at those carefully. Perhaps some solutions will help to address some of the issues that have been raised today. The hon. Member for Hexham talked about more council control, which is what the Competition Commission is suggesting, particularly in terms of multi-operator ticketing.

The hon. Member for South West Norfolk raised the issue of rail-bus integration.

Mr Lee Scott (in the Chair): Order. It is now time for the next debate.

Education System (Dance)

12.30 pm

Mr Frank Doran (Aberdeen North) (Lab): There are few opportunities in the House to debate dance and I am delighted to have secured a debate on such an important topic. I have had a lifelong interest in dance, although only as an audience member. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) and I formed the all-party group on dance some years ago, to support the dance industry.

The UK education system is a world leader in defining dance as a subject for study: its history, genres, choreography, aesthetics, politics and relationship to other art forms. In most schools it is taught within physical education, but it is unique because it develops both artistic and physical skills. Dance has an important role to play in getting young people physically active. It appeals to a large number of young people as an activity, including those who do not enjoy competitive sports and who therefore try to avoid PE in schools.

The Youth Sport Trust audit of dance in English schools and the audit carried out by school dance co-ordinators of the schools in their areas show a high number of schools providing dance in England and Wales. Nearly all—90%—of secondary schools provide dance of some form in the curriculum. Even very young children understand the power of dance to express what we think and how we feel. Studies have shown that dance can make a huge difference to a child's overall performance at school, as well as developing skills to help them to communicate better, work as a team member, analyse further and imagine more. A physical education, school sport and club links scheme survey shows that in England dance is second only to football as the most popular physical activity for young people. The "Dance in Scotland" report published by the Federation of Scottish Theatre in August 2011 states that more people in Scotland dance than play football. That may have something to do with my country's inability to qualify for international tournaments.

Participation in dance activity in schools is positive, because dance encourages young people to take part in and sustain physical activity—even those of us who do not enjoy competitive sport. That can help to tackle issues of obesity and other health problems. Dance has particular appeal to people who may not readily engage with traditional competitive sports, such as young women and some cultural and ethnic groups. Dance is the most popular PE activity for girls. As most girls stop doing any physical activity after the age of 18, dance offers the greatest chance to engage women in lifelong fitness. Identifying exceptionally talented young dancers at school will help to develop a highly skilled workforce, from diverse backgrounds, supplying the UK's world-renowned performing arts industry, which contributes more than £3.5 billion annually to the British economy.

The work done in schools is supplemented by dance organisations across the country. Youth Dance England is the national organisation that champions excellence in dance for and with young people. In a recently published report on its performance over the past three years, YDE was shown to have made a remarkable impact on young people's dance across the country. It worked in a unique way with nine leading dance and arts organisations, based in each region of England, to create the first national network to support the local delivery of dance to young people. That was assessed to be an inexpensive and efficient model, which other art forms were encouraged to adopt. Over three years, with a public investment of £5.5 million—that equated to 58p per school-aged child in England—390,425 young people participated in programmes at national and regional level. I am sorry to be so precise, but the figures are important. There were 1,889 performances and 376,133 people attended them; 15% of English schools took part in U.Dance, a programme to increase the number of dance performances. In comparison, over the same period, investment in music education was £38 per school-aged child.

Most of our dance companies do outreach work in schools. Internationally known organisations such as the Royal Ballet, English National Ballet, Birmingham Royal Ballet, Ballet Rambert and many others reach thousands of school children every year, bringing a professional insight to the education system and encouraging, supporting and raising the sights of countless students. For most students, dance is an activity that they will enjoy and benefit from. Others see dance as a career. That used to be difficult, but the Dance and Drama Awards scheme, introduced in 1999, has opened up possibilities for many more young people. Those awards offer annual scholarships to exceptionally talented performing arts students studying at some of the country's leading providers of vocational training in dance, drama, musical theatre and technical theatre.

DaDAs offer reduced tuition fees and assistance with living expenses for a two or three-year course and are funded by the Government through the Young People's Learning Agency. The performing arts industry contributes more than £3.5 billion annually to the British economy, and students graduating from DaDA-funded courses comprise a high percentage of all new entrants to the British performing arts industry.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): I should perhaps mention that my son is a professional dancer, although he did not qualify for a DaDA. Does my hon. Friend have worries about the longevity and the effect, if DaDAs are not there in the years to come, on people moving into professional dance?

Mr Doran: That is a worry, but we welcomed the continuation of the scheme by the Government last year. We know that it is under review, and hope that it will continue. That is one point that I wanted to make. When the scheme was continued, that reinforced the view that investment in dance is money well spent. The quality and depth of talent in the British entertainment industry in every discipline is the envy of the world. The economic benefits are clear, and the reputational benefits to the country are immense. Economic and cultural priorities make it imperative that the cost-effective benefits of DaDAs should be maintained and should remain in line with new funding arrangements for higher and further education, which come into effect in 2012.

Those are the positives, and they are very significant. Dance is an activity that has benefits across a very wide spectrum. For every age group it has health benefits. It encourages people who might otherwise be shy of engaging in exercise or sports to take exercise. It teaches children

[Mr Doran]

discipline and how to work in a team. It raises their self-esteem and improves their confidence and motivation. At the top end, professional dancers help to contribute to the growing reputation of the British entertainment industry and its massive contribution to the economy, as well as to our image as a country in the rest of the world. In particular in the London area, but throughout the country, there has been an explosion in the number of musicals: I treat my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton as the world expert on those matters.

However, there are also negatives. Recently, the Minister for Universities and Science made remarks suggesting that dance and other subjects were soft options for university entrance and should not be treated on the same level as other more serious subjects. Those comments echoed remarks made by the Secretary of State for Education in opposition and in government, and they are, to say the least, troubling, particularly to a dance industry that has worked incredibly hard to get to the position it is in today. The view of Ministers is misguided and shows a lack of understanding of the benefits of dance and dance training. It seems to me that behind those comments is a very old-fashioned view of what subjects are suitable for academic study—that there are serious subjects that are worthy of study and support, and others that are seen as soft, easy and not to be taken seriously. I do not think that the Government should put dance in that category—if any discipline should be in it at all.

With the help of Dance UK, the industry body that has been central to much of the progress made in the industry in the past few years, I gathered a range of comments on those ministerial views. Most showed the reaction that might be expected when hard-working professionals feel that the work they do and their students' aspirations are being undermined or not taken seriously. However, the comments that I think best express the reaction of dance professionals came from Andrea Martin, head of dance at the College of Richard Collyer, Horsham:

> "Mr Gove's comments are essentially insulting to both teachers of A-level dance and the young people who study it. I teach students who are taking four and sometimes five A levels, including subjects such as English, maths, further maths, biology, chemistry, law, history etc. Without exception, I am told by my students that dance is one of the most challenging, if not the most challenging, of their subjects. It demands creativity, physical discipline and academic rigour. The multi-faceted nature of the A-level dance course necessitates the development of vital life skills—time management, collaborative working, problem solving and critical thinking. The A2 dance written exam is a two-hour paper requiring students to write three essays using skills of critical analysis, historical contextualisation and knowledge of human anatomy and physiology."

She asks a valid question:

> "A soft option?"

It clearly is not a soft option, and it is important that Ministers pay more attention to dance and try to get some direct hands-on experience.

Gordon Banks: There is academic content not only in A-level dance, but in higher education training and degree courses in dance. That content does not stop once someone leaves school. If someone goes into professional dance training, there is an academic responsibility. I hope that my hon. Friend thinks that the Minister should take account of that as well.

Mr Doran: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Two key elements of dance—we see them not just in performances or the way dance is tutored in school; there are many areas where they are crucial—are discipline and teamwork. The Home Office has been looking at dance as a way to help to reform the behaviour of prisoners, for example. Many children with severe learning difficulties or other problems are going into dance courses. Learning about teamwork and discipline is extremely important.

The Secretary of State and I were educated in the same education system, in Scotland. In fact, the school that he went to is in my constituency. I knew him well before he became the Secretary of State—even before he wrote for *The Times*. He knows that one strength of that system, and it has been for centuries, is the belief that every child should be given the broadest possible education, covering the humanities, technical subjects and the arts. In the Scottish system, children study a much wider range of subjects, but not to the same depth as in the A-level system in England. That comes later, at university. The aims are to avoid too narrow an education and to produce a more rounded adult. What we all want to see produced by our education system is those rounded citizens: people who have knowledge and skills, rigour and discipline, and the ability to think creatively instilled in them, and who have the flexibility to cope with changes in the modern workplace.

Dance is not a soft option for students. Studying dance can provide a child with substantial personal assets, which will prepare that child for his or her future in a complex world. I hope that the Secretary of State, the Minister and the Minister for Universities and Science will put aside their preconceptions about dance and take the trouble to see for themselves how dance training operates and what it achieves, and the progress that children, including many with difficulties, can make.

I can recommend one local authority that would be worth a visit: the London borough of Havering, where the Conservative-controlled council has initiated a programme of dance across all its schools and is reaping tremendous benefits as a result. That excellent example is worth examining. Ministers will find that dance is not a soft option, but rather a key element in training any child for adulthood.

12.43 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak briefly in the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Mr Doran) on securing it. He spelled out clearly and powerfully the case for dance, both in the curriculum and in the life of our nation, and how it contributes culturally and economically to the United Kingdom.

In the Scunthorpe area, which I represent, dance has always been popular. There is a long tradition of dance being part of the local community. That is down to the contribution of many people in the community, including local dance schools and dance teachers, such as Kay Travis, who, even now, in her 80s, continues to inspire young people by encouraging them to participate in dance. Having been principal of John Leggett college in Scunthorpe, I concur with the points made by my hon. Friend about the rigour of the dance curriculum at A-level and his quote from the head of dance at the college of Richard Collyer. I saw the cracking work done by Bridget Jacques and Shelley Lee, dance teachers at John Leggett, to bring the best out of the young people who participated in dance. Those young people have gone on to contribute in all walks of life.

It is naïve for certain currents of thought within the Government to believe that dance is in any way a soft option. It is not, and I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity today to dispel those myths. Dance is a demanding and challenging subject at GCSE and A-level. As I visited many schools in the past couple of weeks in my constituency, I saw dance being part of the curriculum at primary and secondary levels and the fantastic work that teachers were doing with young people. There are new facilities in schools, such as the Melior community college, built under Building Schools for the Future. Fantastic dance facilities are being used to good value. I was pleased to be at the opening of the new events centre at North Lindsey college in my constituency, when students on the BTEC dance course gave a fantastic presentation to the people there.

I am pleased to support my hon. Friend in the argument that he has made so clearly and cogently today—the argument for dance in the curriculum, for recognising its rigour, and for recognising the contribution that it makes to the UK's cultural life and economy.

12.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Mr Doran) on securing this important debate. I know that he is a strong advocate for dance and for the promotion of dance for its health and social benefits and educational value. He pointed to the creativity and physical discipline involved in learning to dance, and, for some dancers, teamwork.

Dance is important to the cultural life of a country, and it is enjoyed by performers and audiences alike, be it classical, traditional or contemporary. Dance has something to offer to people of all ages, and if the popularity of "Strictly Come Dancing" is anything to go by, it is never too late to learn to dance. I just wish that my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Vince Cable), or indeed the former Member for Maidstone and The Weald, Ann Widdecombe, were here today; they could certainly contribute to the debate. It is also never too early to start to dance. Young children have a natural instinct for movement to music, and that should be encouraged along their path to adulthood. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North also alluded to that in his opening remarks.

The Government believe that every child should experience a wide variety of high-quality cultural experiences, including dance. In April, we commissioned an independent review of cultural education led by Darren Henley, managing director of Classic FM, who also led the review of music education. Mr Henley will be reporting on how we can realise the ambition of giving high-quality cultural experiences to our children while ensuring the best use of public money. That will include experiences within and outside the school day. I know that the main cultural groups have not only responded to the call for evidence, but taken the opportunity to meet Darren Henley to contribute to the review. His report and our response to it will be published later in the autumn. Dance has an important place in schools and I am confident that that will continue.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that by introducing the English Baccalaureate, which introduces a hierarchy of subjects and excludes subjects such as dance and drama, and by cutting quotas for drama teachers for universities such as Durham, the Government are placing dance and drama in a serious situation for the future?

Mr Gibb: I do not accept that argument. I will come to talk about the English Baccalaureate in a moment. The E-bac has always been kept at a small enough range of important, facilitating subjects to allow scope within the school curriculum timetable for students to take a wider range of subjects, such as vocational ones, music, art and economics.

We know from previous surveys that dance remains the second most popular activity, after football, among young people. However, something that interested me, and probably many other people, was the statistic about Scotland that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North mentioned. Perhaps it is the prevalence of Scottish dancing that is the key there. It is true also that 97% of all schools provide dancing activity. The popularity of dance is not limited to primary schools, where dance is a compulsory element of the current PE national curriculum; it is also a feature of secondary school education, where it is optional.

As we set out in our White Paper "The Importance of Teaching", we are embarking on a new era of freedom for schools—freedom from unnecessary bureaucracy and from an overly prescriptive national curriculum. The review of the national curriculum was launched in January and is being conducted in two phases. Phase 1 will focus on the overall shape and nature of the new national curriculum and will also consider new programmes of study for English, mathematics, the sciences and physical education. Those subjects will continue to be compulsory in all four key stages. The programmes of study will be finalised in autumn 2012, with first teaching in schools from September 2013.

Central to the Government's educational philosophy is the view that not all that is good must be centrally mandated or managed. We believe that the new curriculum will allow schools greater freedom to teach beyond what children should be expected to know in core subjects. We are looking to create more room for excellent innovative teaching and curriculum design. We want more time available for teaching in areas such as dance, and the ability to create a broad and balanced school curriculum to meet pupils' needs.

The hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) raised the issue of the English baccalaureate and her unease that dance is not included within its subjects. Although the English baccalaureate will give pupils the opportunity to study a core of academic subjects, it does not mean that we wish to restrict their choices or opportunities for wider study and the core of subjects is small enough to allow for that. We know that study in other subjects will be just as valuable to pupils, depending on what they go on to do after 16.

[Mr Gibb]

Nic Dakin: Will the Minister accept that a relatively wide English bac will have a natural impact on the nature and number of minority subjects that any school can provide on its curriculum in key stage 4?

Mr Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. If we go through the English baccalaureate subjects—English, maths, science, one of the two humanities and a modern foreign language—all of them, apart from a modern foreign language and a humanity, are already compulsory to 16. We are talking about two GCSEs: history or geography, and a modern foreign language. Modern foreign languages were compulsory until 2004, and there is a body of opinion that says that they should be made compulsory again. The debate is about history and geography, and there has been a significant decline in those subjects over recent years, which is a cause for concern. None the less, if we add up all those GCSE subjects and add on a humanity, it is still small enough for pupils to study one, two or three more GCSEs beyond those core academic subjects, depending on which combination of those subjects they take. That is right because the Russell group universities and others say that those subjects are the facilitating subjects that keep options open for young people to make decisions about their career choices later in life. International evidence has shown that countries around the world in high-performing jurisdictions are delaying young people from making decisions over career choices. They keep options open for longer so that young people can make the right choices.

Pat Glass: Clearly, if the Minister and the people around him feel that that is possible within key stage 4, they have never put together such a timetable. Moving back to dance, is the Minister aware that the highest increase in dance, movement and drama is among disaffected young girls who have a history of non-attendance? Given the Government's view about the importance of behaviour and attendance, surely there is a good argument for including dance and drama at key stage 4 as a core subject.

Mr Gibb: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and I do not disagree with anything that she has said. At the moment, about 2.5% of the cohort are taking GCSE dance. I do not see why those figures will not continue, even with the popularity of the E-bac as a concept. I do not believe that the introduction of the new performance measure will have dire consequences for those selecting dance GCSE, any more than it will for those choosing other subjects that are not included in the E-bac combination.

When young people choose their GCSE subjects at key stage 4, it is important that they base their choices on what they need to progress. We recognise the wider benefits that studying subjects such as dance can bring. All pupils should be encouraged to study non-E-bac subjects alongside the core English baccalaureate to benefit from a well-rounded education.

To encourage talented young dancers, I am pleased to say that the Government maintain their support for low-income families through the music and dance scheme. The scheme represents the top of the pyramid for performing arts education and training and is the Government's main vehicle for funding the training needs of exceptionally talented young dancers and musicians. Although small—the scheme is funded at £29.5 million this year—the scheme, its beneficiaries, its participating organisations and its patrons have a significant impact on the performing arts world. Although we have not made a formal evaluation, we know that MDS-aided pupils go on to become leading members of their profession in ballet and dance companies at home and abroad, some as soloists with international recognition and renown, such as prima ballerinas Darcey Bussell and Lauren Cuthbertson. Royal Ballet School students regularly win major competitions such as young British dancer of the year and the Lausanne international ballet competition in Switzerland.

In September, when I visited White Lodge, the Royal Ballet school, I could see that the standard of our young dancers is world class.

Mr Doran: Before the Minister finishes his speech, I would be grateful if he addressed the main thrust of my contribution: why do the Secretary of State and the Minister for Universities and Science suggest that the status of a dance A-level will not be the same as other A-levels? Why do they suggest that it should be downgraded and seen as a soft subject when it comes to university admission?

Mr Gibb: As I have heard the Secretary of State and the Minister for Universities and Science say on numerous occasions, it depends what the young person intends to study and what they want to go on to do. The tragedy is that there are young people who wish to go to a university to study a particular subject, but they have the wrong combination of subjects to help them to obtain a place at that university to study that subject. That is what the Minister is seeking to address. He wants to ensure that young people have the right advice on the right combination of subjects. That was alluded to not only by the Minister, but by organisations such as the Sutton Trust, which is concerned that too many able children from poorer backgrounds are choosing the wrong combination of A-levels, thus narrowing their range of options for universities and beyond.

Mr Doran: That sounds like the Minister is suggesting a disincentive to study dance.

Mr Gibb: A dance A-level may well be right, and probably is right, for students who wish to take an arts-related subject at university, but it could be wrong for someone who wishes to study a science at university. Two science A-levels and dance may not be the right combination for many universities offering science degrees. There are examples of young people taking the wrong combination to enhance their chances of getting on those competitive courses.

We remain committed to supporting talented young people and adults in accessing specialist dance and drama provision, with national grants also being available for out-of-school-hours training through 21 designated centres for advanced training.

Marine Operations (Weymouth)

1 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Scott, for calling me to speak. It is a privilege to be here in Westminster Hall under your chairmanship. I also thank the Minister for being here today; it is a privilege and an honour to see him here too.

Last week, the people of South Dorset delivered a petition to No. 10. "Save Our Lifesavers" was signed by 22,000 people, signalling their overwhelming concern about the regrettable decision to close Portland coastguard station. No other subject has galvanised such a reaction in my constituency in recent years. I would be very interested to hear whether the Minister has encountered such commitment from the Solent area, which I believe is the area favoured for the new MOC, or marine operations centre.

South Dorset is bounded on 180° by the ocean. That water forms an indelible part of our history, culture and everyday experience. Fishermen, divers, sailors, mariners, water skiers, day-boaters, cliff-walkers, birdwatchers, rock climbers—we all share that coastline, and as anyone who knows the sea will testify, it must be treated with respect. On land, as the emergency services will confirm, the "golden hour" is critical in the rescue of casualties; in the water, that period is down to seconds.

Our coastguard station is one of the busiest in the country. Currently, it is one of 18 coastguard stations tasked with protecting our waters, but after the Olympics it is due to close, with staff being offered posts at the new MOC, which might be at Solent. That new MOC, supported by nine 24-hour sub-centres, will undertake all the essential tasks of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency around our 11,000 nautical miles of coastline. Does the Minister accept that that will leave huge gaps in our defences?

For South Dorset, the loss of accumulated years of expertise, knowledge and good will is nothing short of catastrophic. However, in the face of a deeply regrettable and seemingly irreversible decision, we are determined to move on. We are nothing if not resilient.

The MCA has stated:

> "There is no existing Coastguard facility on the south coast suitable for conversion into a MOC."

I disagree. I want to draw the Minister's attention to a significant proposal from Weymouth and Portland borough council that the new MOC should be located in South Dorset. He has already seen that submission; indeed, I see that it is on his desk now. In addition, I have handed him a newspaper, which I also see he has with him, that has been lovingly put together by the supporters of the petition, who feel so strongly about the issue.

South Dorset has the infrastructure, the expertise and the will to make that proposal viable and cost-effective. I will start by discussing infrastructure. The MCA proposal refers to the advantages of locating any MOC close to a large existing maritime sector. Weymouth and Portland has one of the largest maritime sectors in the country. As a former naval base, Portland's deep-water port provides many built-in advantages. It is the closest point in the western channel to the main shipping lanes and is already in constant use as a busy commercial port. It has harbour revision order approval for significant expansion. Plans for further major marine-based operations, including ship repairing and refuelling, and servicing of the proposed giant wind farm off the Isle of Wight, are under way.

Five potential sites are identified in that bid and details of them are attached to the report in the appendices. Three sites are in suitable existing buildings that are available immediately, saving on new build costs. As the Minister knows, the Solent MOC will require an entirely new build and in these austere times I say to him that surely there are savings to be made by locating in an existing building rather than having to build a new facility.

We—South Dorset—have a magnificent former flag officers' sea-training building, which was specifically designed as a command and control centre. The Minister can see details of that building at appendix 3. It would need only refurbishment. It sits in the harbour, providing easy access to the open sea, berths, and cliffs for training and operations. Other potential MOC sites include the former defence research agency at Southwell business park on Portland, which I know he knows well, and Pullman Court in Dorchester. South Dorset has good roads, twice-hourly rail services to London, four airports within a 90-minute drive and ferry services to the continent. In addition, our recently enhanced broadband and communication links, which are part of South Dorset's Olympic legacy, can carry the MCA's new integrated and networked service.

Secondly, we have the expertise. There is a strong local skills base in marine engineering, dating from Portland's recent history as an operational naval base. A MOC sited in the area would tap into a rich vein of maritime knowledge and experience. The harbour at Portland is already home to the search and rescue helicopter that would enhance any MOC. Also, we already host the full complement of RNLI rescue services: the Severn class offshore lifeboat, the Atlantic inshore lifeboat, rescue craft and beach lifeguards. Furthermore, RNLI headquarters is nearby in Poole.

Portland port has existing relations with the Royal Navy, the Fleet Auxiliary, the Royal Marines, special forces, the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and many other organisations, and the National Sailing Academy is based in the port at Osprey quay. In addition to the Olympics, which take place next year, Portland holds world-class sailing regattas, which boost the use of our waters.

Thirdly, we have the will. Dorset is dedicated to saving its lifesavers, as the petition and all the love and attention that have gone into the newspaper that the Minister has received demonstrate. Our proposal to site the new MOC in South Dorset has the unqualified backing of all Dorset MPs, including the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin). Bournemouth and Poole unitary authorities, Dorset police, Dorset fire and rescue service, Dorset county council and the Environment Agency all support the proposal too. Weymouth and Portland borough council, the author of the proposal, aims to develop the area as a centre for marine excellence, which is an aim entirely aligned with MCA objectives. In addition, the area can offer more affordable housing than Hampshire, good schools and an enviable quality of life, and the borough council has undertaken to provide dedicated staff to assist with relocation.

[Richard Drax]

I have already mentioned the petition that was given to No. 10 Downing street. The community has spoken loudly and clearly about a cause that is dear to its heart. I believe that the merits of the proposal—the infrastructure, the expertise and the will that already exist in South Dorset—deserve serious consideration and I ask the Minister to assure me that he will consider it. Can he give us any hope that he will do so?

Finally, I want to touch once more on the decision-making process that has brought us to this point. Wherever the southern MOC is sited, we are told that the professional coastguards at Portland will all be offered jobs there. Although that is good news, the ability of those coastguards to report daily on the winds, tides and other conditions that are currently outside their windows will be lost. The coves, caves and cliffs that locals know so intimately will be reduced to a grid reference on a computer screen. Some cynics call that process "rescue by Google" and I fear that it will not be adequate.

On a busy summer's day, the calls will come in thick and fast. The minutiae involved in every rescue—the sheer volume of detail—could be overwhelming to an operator who is unfamiliar with the area. Inevitably, if delays occur rescues will take longer. I will not stand here and say that lives will be endangered, because I have no proof of that; it would be rash of me to say so. Inevitably, however, if rescues take longer and someone is in the sea, where seconds count, one can see that the consequence of that could be—I stress, could be—that someone who might have been rescued more quickly may possibly die.

We are told that the hardened communications within the operations supercentre will increase resilience and flexibility in a disaster, but are we not in danger of relying too heavily on the miracle of modern technology? We all know that technology breaks down; the NHS supercomputer is an acknowledged failure. The disastrous reorganisation—I know that the Minister is waiting for this line, and he was vociferously opposed—of the fire and rescue service, of which he was a member, which was shelved at a cost of £500 million, uncomfortably mirrors, in my view and that of many others, the plans for the coastguard.

We are responsible for 1,250,000 nautical square miles of water around our coastline, yet we are seriously considering halving the number of stations. Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole Local Resilience Forum is gravely concerned that we are spreading responsibilities too thinly.

As a former soldier, the Minister knows only too well the importance of local co-ordination, and to explain it I shall use a Northern Ireland scenario with which he is familiar. He, like me, served in the Household Division, and knows that a company needs a company headquarters, a battalion a battalion headquarters and a division a divisional headquarters. If the divisional headquarters is cluttered by information from the patrols on the ground—the platoons, of which there are many—communication will be blocked by unnecessary minutiae.

I want to emphasise the importance of local co-ordination, with which the Minister is so familiar, because it is absolutely vital. No officer commanding the regiments that the Minister and I served in would say, "Get rid of company headquarters. We'll just have battalion headquarters," because all the intimate detail at company headquarters is not necessarily passed to battalion unless or until it is necessary to call in more reserves or assets to deal with situations on the ground. Local people know their platoons—in this case, local watchkeepers know their area—and they make a difference. We have to accept that we are losing our station, but we urge the Minister to site the new MOC in Weymouth or Portland.

The MCA is a highly respected service that has evolved over 200 years to suit our island needs, so why reinvent the wheel? Technology is not necessarily the answer. I suspect that this has a lot to do with money, but money, or the lack of it, is not always the reason or the solution. The sea is unforgiving—the Minister and I know that, and the watchkeepers and the people who rescue know it—but the electorate will be more so. I most humbly urge the Minister to reopen the consultation and think again.

1.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Penning): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Scott. When we entered the House in 2005 neither of us would have dreamt that I would be standing here as the Minister and you would be in the Chair.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on initiating the debate. He served gallantly in the Coldstream Guards when I was a humble guardsman in the Grenadiers. I was moved by his question about whether we would get rid of the company headquarters. As a humble guardsman who never commanded a section let alone anything else, I can say yes, we would have done so many a time, because at my level we never understood what was going on.

Let me touch briefly on how we reached the current position, where we are in the consultation process and the decisions we have taken. I pay tribute to the community of South Dorset. I know that part of the world well, having spent most of my holidays as a young child on the beaches of Durdle Door. I dive at Lulworth now, although it is a bit too cold for me as I get older, and South Dorset is still one of the most beautiful parts of this great nation.

The community coming together to fight for what they believe in is what community spirit is all about. In the scrapbook that my hon. Friend gave me—I use "scrapbook" in its traditional sense; I do not mean that it was not a good thing to produce—I see so many press cuttings of rescues and lives being saved, and we are going to enhance and invest in that volunteer part of the coastguard. The RNLI, whose college in Poole I visited recently, does amazing work, all funded by people's gratitude to the institution. The RNLI covers the whole of the island of Ireland and is the only organisation in the Republic that has "Royal" in its name. I have met three transport Ministers for southern Ireland, and they have paid tribute to the RNLI's work.

When I inherited this position nearly 16 months ago, there was a set of plans on my desk for a reorganisation of coastguard co-ordination centres. It had been around for years. It was there when the chief coastguard, Mr Rod Johnson, arrived, and he had been in post for nearly two years. I understand why the previous Minister, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) is not here—it is a half-hour debate and I have debated the subject many times with him—but he freely admits that the proposals had been discussed. Members of the coastguard had, believe it or not, been in industrial dispute for years over pay and other issues. Their starting pay of about £13,500 is unacceptable for someone in an emergency service, and that was one of the things we looked at.

I had a choice: start from scratch or say, "We'll go with a consultation but I promise the public and Members that we will come out with a set of proposals showing that we've listened and that the service will be different from the one we went in with." I think that everyone accepts that the proposals the Secretary of State announced to the House in the summer were radically different, but contained the principle of resilience in the system that had not been present until then. Many people say to me, "Minister, this is just about saving money," but we are investing huge amounts in the system to address the fact that we have a national emergency service with no national resilience.

When my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset and I served in the armed forces, the one thing we all relied on was resilience. When I was on the borders in Northern Ireland, I would be told on the system, "We will get someone." I appreciate that there have been problems with communications over the years. When Bowman first came in for the military, there was a lot of concern about resilience, and when I visited an exercise as a new MP, I was told that Bowman stood for "better off with map and Nokia", but it has developed a lot and I have seen it in use in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

We needed to say to the public, "Let's be honest with you." We all have huge respect for the work of the professional staff and volunteers—predominantly they are volunteers—in Her Majesty's coastguard. I pay tribute also to other lifeboat crews. Many lifeboats, particularly on the south coast, are not RNLI ones, and it would be improper of me to omit them from the praise.

In the responses to the first consultation, people were saying, "We know you're going to have this new resilience and a new national co-ordination centre, but there will be a massive loss of local knowledge." However, in the local coastguard stations I visited, some people said, "Save us; don't look at any modernisation," but others said, "We think there should be about eight, nine or 10 coastguard stations, not 18." A good half dozen of the submissions, including from Belfast and Falmouth, were about how we could have a proper national resilient service. So I thought, "If the coastguards are telling me that they accept that 18 isn't necessarily the way forward, and that eight or nine is, how would it work?" Then it became obvious that a pairing system had been in place within the coastguard for several years, for resilience purposes. Because the coastguard could not have national resilience, it created a pairing system in which one station would cover for another if it was short of staff, if communications went down or in the event of repairs or conversions. When I was at Swansea the other day to meet the coastguard, the station was completely switched off, and Milford Haven covered the whole area.

Richard Drax: Bearing in mind that we have only 10 minutes left, we all understand where we are in the history. The issue now is whether the Minister can offer any light on whether he will move the new MOC from the favoured location in Solent to us. Our place has the history and environment to support such a centre. We also have buildings ready to go, which will save much money. That is what my constituents are looking for guidance on.

Mike Penning: I apologise, but I was answering the questions that my hon. Friend raised about local knowledge, resilience and so on. I have 10 minutes, and I assure him that I can answer his question.

We decided that we would change to a pairing system in which one of the pairs would be dropped, the two extremities—the Western Isles and Shetland, which were never paired before—would stay in 24-hour operation and we would drop one of the MOC national headquarters, because in the end, I could not condone how much two would have cost. We went to a second consultation on four specific points: whether Swansea or Milford Haven would close, whether Liverpool or Holyhead would close, whether the Western Isles and Shetland should run 24 hours and whether there should be one or two MOCs. That consultation has just finished.

I have listened carefully to the points that my hon. Friend has made—in his position as a Back Bencher, I would do exactly the same—but if I stood here today and said that I was willing to reconsider, I would have to reopen the whole consultation process, because this topic was not part of the consultation. To make that decision, I would have to consider several things. We said in the original consultation that we would like the MOC to be in the Portsmouth-Southampton area, for logical reasons. The MCA has a large footprint in that part of the country, particularly in Gosport at Daedalus and at its own headquarters. From a cost perspective, there was an obvious logic to building a new MOC headquarters on existing Department for Transport facilities, which is why we chose that model.

It would be difficult for me to change my mind in light of what I received from the people of Weymouth and my hon. Friend during the second consultation. I would have to change my decisions after not only the first but the second consultation and then reopen the consultation process on the MOC. I could not do that. It would not be cost-effective given the efficiencies that we need, particularly as we already have a large estate footprint available.

I am happy to be here to represent the Government and say where we are. I hope that I have answered most of my hon. Friend's questions. Although I understand that he is, rightly, representing his constituents—I am also pleased to see the Minister of State, Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb) here; as another Minister, he will understand—I cannot give that light at the end of the rainbow and open up the whole process all over again for a further consultation. The reasons why we came to our previous conclusions still exist. All the premises in the Weymouth area to which my hon. Friend refers are premises that we do not own. Other Departments might, but we do not, and we would have to do an analysis.

[Mike Penning]

MCA headquarters are in the area where we propose to build. We might put the MOC within that building so as not to expand our empire, which I am trying desperately to avoid. We may be able to facilitate that. The Daedalus site in Gosport is huge, and the Department for Transport uses little of it; it already operates on a helicopter basis, and we own it.

I know this is difficult. I am the bearer of bad news. As a Minister, I always try to be as positive and helpful as I can with colleagues across the House, but I do not want to give my hon. Friend and his constituents the feeling that it is possible that we might change our minds and reopen the consultation on where the MOC will go, mostly because that was not part of the second consultation in the first place. The decision where to put the MOC was based on the first consultation; the only relevant decision in the second was whether to have one MOC or two.

I know that that will disappoint my hon. Friend and his constituents, but I reiterate that the issue of local knowledge in people who rescue was addressed many years ago in adaptations to the pairing system. Some stations have been down for months while work was being done on them, and the other stations have coped. However, what they could never do, to go back to an earlier point, was be controlled centrally by division or brigade headquarters—or even regimental; the numbers are not huge—and provide the sort of pay, training and promotion prospects that we would all like for anybody working within our constituencies.

Part of this is about money—there is no argument about that; I have had to make considerable savings in the Department—but actually, it is about resilience. The ex-Second Sea Lord is the chief executive. He has served his country all his life. The chief coastguard has been in the coastguard for most of his working life. They would not be sitting with me discussing the plan if we thought that there was a danger. There is a danger in leaving things as they are. We will phase in the changes. We are not going to wake up one morning to find it has all been switched off and closed. We will ensure that the IT and the communications systems in particular work before we phase out.

Understandably, staff members are leaving the MCA at the moment, particularly at the stations earmarked for closure. I cannot blame them. They are quality people; other jobs are becoming available, and they are taking them. However, I cannot recruit new people to those coastguard stations knowing full well that I am going to close them. We will look carefully at manning levels, but some stations might close slightly earlier than predicted, simply because we cannot man them.

Richard Drax: I hear the Minister's argument. Clearly, my constituents and I do not agree, but we are listening to him. It is his decision, and he is saying that there is absolutely no chance. If that is the case in black and white—"Forget it"—it would be useful to hear that. Also, can he give any reassurance that our rescue helicopter on Portland will be there for the foreseeable future and is not under threat?

Mike Penning: I cannot say anything about the helicopters because, as I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, a criminal investigation of the procurement process is ongoing. At the moment, we do not know where our helicopters are likely to be. The Ministry of Defence has decided to withdraw, so it will be a civilian matter run through the Department for Transport and the MCA.

I did not want to be this brutal and straightforward, but I must. Where to put the MCA in the south was not part of the second consultation. That decision has been made. It will be in the Solent area. Although I respect enormously the work done by the community for the second consultation, I am afraid that that matter was not part of the second consultation, and sadly, I am not willing to reopen the consultation.

Mr Lee Scott (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) to introduce the next debate, I remind hon. Members that unless they have put in to speak in a half-hour debate, only the lead Member and the Minister will be able to speak.

School Places (Bristol)

1.30 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Scott. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate a matter of great concern to many of my constituents and to parents across Bristol. I thank the Minister for having a meeting earlier today with all four Bristol MPs, the council cabinet's lead member on schools, children and young people and the council officer who deals with those issues. It was a useful meeting, although, unfortunately, the Minister did not produce a large cheque at the end of it.

As I explained to the Minister this morning, Bristol faces a crisis in primary school provision: there simply are not enough primary school places. The number of four-year-olds—that is the age at which children start reception class—has increased by 20% in Bristol over the past four years. This year alone, we needed an additional 14 reception classes. Demand is projected to rise steeply over the next couple of years, tailing off a little, but then taking off again. It is estimated that Bristol will need a minimum of an additional 3,000 places by 2015.

Bristol has seen the fastest growth in pupil numbers in the country. The council estimates that the percentage change in primary school numbers is three times the rate across England. According to Office for National Statistics projections for population growth between 2008 and 2015, the increase on 2010 levels will be 11 times higher in Bristol than the national average. Judged against its own historical standards and national comparisons, therefore, there has been unprecedented growth in Bristol, and I ask the Minister to consider the city's special case for urgent funding.

There are a number of reasons for the rapid increase in the primary school-age population. Bristol is a popular place to live for many reasons, including economic and cultural reasons. Immigration is also a factor, although it is not the only cause. This is a city-wide problem, as the Minister will have seen from the map we showed him this morning; it is not a problem just in the inner-city areas, where black and minority ethnic populations are traditionally concentrated.

In areas such as St George, which is in my constituency, the pressure on school places has come about as a result of gradual demographic change, as older people who have lived in these areas all their lives have died or moved to sheltered accommodation, and younger people have moved in because these are cheap places to live. Obviously, those younger people go on to have families.

The recession has meant that parents who might previously have opted for private education can no longer afford it. Equally, improving education standards in Bristol mean that parents might be less likely to opt for private provision or to take their children out of the Bristol local authority area and to schools in north Somerset or south Gloucestershire, which has been a major factor over the years. There have also been major housing developments, and there is an urgent need to build more housing in Bristol, so this problem will not go away.

This year, Bristol city council had to find an additional 250 places to ensure that all reception-age children could start school in September. It has had to resort to adding modular classrooms to already stretched schools. Although those classrooms are an improvement on the Portakabins and huts we might remember from school, they are still not an ideal, permanent solution. One school has had to convert its information and communications technology suite to classroom use, which, again, is not ideal.

The council has had to spend £5.3 million on such temporary solutions. There is no guidance from central Government and no clear view on the way forward to enable the long-term planning we need. Spending money on temporary classrooms, rather than permanent school buildings, is a quick-fix solution, and it might prove to be an inefficient use of scarce resources in the long term.

Some schools, such as May Park in my constituency, have increased from two to four-form entry. Obviously, that does not solve the problem in itself, because the new pupils will move up next year, and so on through the school, creating an additional need for classrooms if each year is to have four forms. Schools such as May Park are doubling in size, which creates additional pressures, because the dining halls and other facilities—particularly the play facilities—are not designed to cope with the numbers. When I visited Air Balloon Hill primary in my constituency last week, I was told that it had to spend £90,000 on a new electricity generator because the addition of a few extra modular classrooms meant that the existing generator was unable to cope with the demand.

The local authority has been quite imaginative, and it has done all it can to put in place temporary quick fixes, but we need more radical and lasting remedies. The task is becoming greater with year-on-year growth in the four-year-old population. By 2015, it is estimated that Bristol will need a minimum of 100 additional classes, which is equivalent to 14 one-form entry schools. Depending on housing development and migration patterns, the 3,000-place shortfall could be quite a significant underestimate, and it is suggested that the figure could be as high as 5,300.

The pressing priority is September 2012. The council has 11 months to find 15 additional reception classes. Legally, it must provide those places, but that is not the only reason why failure is not an option. As all the other MPs in Bristol will confirm, parents are coming to us because they simply cannot get their children into a school that they could physically deliver them to in time each morning. I have met parents who have a child in a school at one end of the city and who are being told that their next child, who is starting reception class, has to go to a school several miles away. However, public transport in Bristol is pretty abysmal; we have the worst traffic congestion of any city in the country. Parents tell me that they will have to give up work, particularly if they work shifts and can no longer use breakfast clubs and after-school clubs because there are fewer of them. Parents are also having their child care credits cut, so it is more difficult to fund child care. Physically, parents are not able to be in three places at once; they cannot get to work on time, get one child to school and get another child to a child minder. Parents cannot manage the logistics of getting their children to their schools. Even though the new term has started, some children still do not have a school place to go to.

[Kerry McCarthy]

On a more positive front, the local authority has a strategy to resolve the crisis, as the Minister heard this morning. Its children and young people's services have been working with the local education partnership and developers. They have detailed plans for rebuilds and have identified potential sites for new schools. The standardised designs can be constructed quickly and efficiently. Importantly, estimates suggest that they offer a 20% reduction in building bulletin guidance. Unfortunately, the stumbling block is a £110 million funding gap.

To give an example that I mentioned to the Minister this morning, Air Balloon Hill primary school has spent £500,000 on working up detailed plans for the major building works it desperately needs if it is to continue as a four-form entry school. The work must start by February next year if the school is to be ready for a four-form entry 2012 reception class, but it needs £4.5 million if that is to happen. As I am sure the Minister will tell us, the figures will be looked at in November, so it could be into the new year before the school has any idea whether it will get the additional funding it needs. Obviously, other schools across Bristol will be in the same position and will be seeking similar sums.

Capital funding for 2011-12 has been reduced by 20%, and the budget was necessarily strained by September's pupil increase, leaving the council in a position where it cannot begin to address next year's shortage. The Secretary of State announced an extra £500 million in July to fund basic need nationally, but the council needs a degree of certainty about what its share of the money will be and when it will receive it.

The methodology for allocating basic need funding also means that Bristol is unlikely to receive its fair share. The Department judges basic need according to the surplus of all primary school places across the local authority. That will change in the next few years as the increased population moves up through the school, but there is technically a surplus in primary school places in Bristol at the moment because there are spare places—classes of 25 or 26 pupils—in years five and six. However, that does not really help someone with a four-year-old who needs to start school immediately. I urge the Minister not to do this netting off of surplus places against shortfall, but to look at how many pupils we need year on year, because children will otherwise be sitting at home unable to go to school.

Bristol has recently—this September—received funding for a new school, but it is not the school that the city desperately needs. Following concerted campaigning from some parents in one part of the city and the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie), Bristol can now claim to have the largest free school in the country. However, it is a secondary school and it does nothing to address need in the city.

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that, given there is a need for primary school places in the area, obviously there will be a need for more secondary school places in the future and that we have learned the lesson that forward planning goes a long way? Does she also agree that it was most unfortunate that discussions were not progressed more by the city council when it considered having an all-through free school on the St Ursula's site? That would have been able to attract capital funding from the Department for the primary school places that she is making a good point in saying we need.

Kerry McCarthy: The point I am making is that there is a surplus in secondary school provision that is predicted to be in place until 2017. I suggest that the entire movement towards getting a secondary school in Bristol was misguided. The priority should have been solely to focus on the primary school need. I understand that the new free school has a capacity of 150 places and that only 82 children started there this September. The three closest secondary schools—Henbury, Oasis Brightstowe and Orchard—all have a significant surplus of provision. Indeed, the head teacher of Henbury, which already has about 145 spare places, has warned about the impact that the free school will have upon her school.

As I was saying, I do not believe that there was a need for a Bristol free school, particularly a secondary school. We should have focused on primary schools instead. The bizarre thing about what has happened with the Bristol free school is that the preferred site was the former St Ursula site bought by Bristol city council because it represented good value for money for a new primary school. However, it was confirmed last week that Bristol free school will remain on its temporary site on Burghill road, Southmead. It is worth noting that half the parents who supported the Bristol free school during the consultation stated that they would not send their children there if it were located on Burghill road, so not only is there no need for the school, but it may not even have the community support on which free schools are supposed to be based.

The strange thing is that the catchment area of the new free school is based on the St Ursula site that was the preferred location. Some 80% of the school's places will be unashamedly given to the affluent BS9 community, which is in the top 5% of the most affluent areas in the country. At the same time, access will be restricted for families living directly around the school in the less prosperous area of Southmead. The school is actually outside its own catchment area. There seems to be a strange sense of what the priorities should be. We should be focusing on the need for a primary school instead.

There is now an E-ACT primary academy on the St Ursula site, but it has had to restrict its intake to two forms rather than the preferred three or four-form entry in case the Bristol free school also moved to the site. Bristol free school has diverted much needed resources from Bristol's existing secondary schools and has enabled the Government to concentrate on the wealthier areas while completely ignoring Bristol's actual needs.

Charlotte Leslie: Does the hon. Lady agree that, given the passionate case she is making for primary school places today, it is a great shame that the Labour Administration and the Building Schools for the Future programme concentrated on secondary schools and completely neglected primary school need? In 2008, it was a Labour council that oversaw a primary review that cut all surplus places in the primary schools. Although I very much welcome her concern for primary school places and for the really upsetting plight of parents in

Bristol, does she not agree that it is a great shame that the matter was not sorted out when her party was in council power and in government?

Kerry McCarthy: Our party was leading on the council for a very short time, as I am sure the hon. Lady knows. I will not in any way apologise for the Building Schools for the Future programme and the academies programme in Bristol, as they made a phenomenal difference to standards in our secondary schools. She will know that there was a real problem with people taking their children out of schools in Bristol, particularly in years 5 or 6 of primary school, because they did not want them to go to Bristol state schools. We have seen a huge increase in standards in those schools built under Building Schools for the Future. That programme was not about addressing the places issue and the shortage of places; it was about addressing school standards. It is really important that we did that.

The case for investment in Bristol's primary schools is not only pressing, but urgent. Building works must start within the next few months if we are to have enough classrooms in September. Some schools have been hesitant to commit to additional classes in case that pushes them into debt. We therefore need decisions to be made as soon as possible.

Bristol city council has made several representations to the Department for Education and, as I mentioned, local MPs met with the Minister responsible for schools earlier today. That meeting was originally set up just to discuss the case for extra funding for schools in Bristol West. That is the wrong way to approach the matter. This is a city-wide problem and all four Bristol MPs should be working together to help to resolve it.

It is also unfortunate that the letter from the Liberal Democrat council leader to the Secretary of State making the case for additional funding gives the erroneous impression that the problem is specific to the north of Bristol. As the Minister will have seen from the map that he was shown, the problem is not restricted to any particular area of the city. The issue occurs in pockets across the city and, although it is particularly a problem in the inner city, it affects all four Bristol constituencies.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Dawn Primarolo) is sitting here watching the debate because her post as Deputy Speaker means that she is not allowed to take part. However, she has told me that she has about 30 constituents who were not offered a school place in the local area and that the problem is particularly acute in the Southville and Bedminster wards. As in Bristol East, there are very limited opportunities to expand schools in Bristol South on their current sites, and my right hon. Friend rightly joined us this morning to make the case to the Minister.

There are major shortfalls in the number of primary school places across the city. It is a city-wide problem that needs to be resolved at a city-wide level in the best interests of all families in Bristol, not just a select few. I urge the Minister to work with the local authority to secure immediate and lasting solutions. I look forward to hearing what he has to say today.

1.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on securing this important debate. I know she is no stranger to the issues surrounding education provision in Bristol, as she has served the community well in local and national politics for a number of years. As she said, earlier today we met with the right hon. Member for Bristol South (Dawn Primarolo) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol West (Stephen Williams) and for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) to discuss the issues facing Bristol in terms of population increase.

I am aware that the hon. Member for Bristol East has been active, as she has been today, in raising the difficulties faced by schools in her area, especially with respect to her concerns surrounding the establishment of the proposed Bristol free school. I hope that, by now, she has received a response from my noble Friend Lord Hill to the letter regarding the Bristol free school. There is overwhelming demand for a Bristol free school from parents in that area. She is right to point out that it was in the BS9 area that the community campaigned for a new school. That community felt that too many pupils had to leave the local authority to receive a good standard of education. In fact, hundreds of parents attended a recent parents' evening for the September 2012 year 7 intake, which demonstrates that there is significant demand for the new free school.

The hon. Lady referred to capacity issues. She is right: the reception to year 6 primary population in Bristol is forecast to increase from 27,000 in 2009-10 to around 33,500 by 2014-15. She is also right to point out that, at the moment, there are 3,074 surplus places across 70 schools, 15 of which have more than 25% spare places. However, the council is also projecting a deficit of primary places from 2012-13 based on the May 2010 school capacity figures.

The greatest demand for places is in the east central area of the city, but the surplus places tend to be in schools located in the north and south city boundary areas. That is why the hon. Lady is concerned with the methodology of how capital is allocated to local authorities. She made that point powerfully, with other hon. Members, at the meeting this morning. I also understand, and am sympathetic to, the logistical problems. I think that representatives from the local authority said that 94% of parents in the Bristol area achieve one of their first three primary school choices, but that still leaves 6% who do not. Some parents find themselves having to travel significant distances to secure a primary school place.

The Government are aware of the pressures that many local authorities face in light of population increases and the very tight spending review capital settlement for the Department. We must never forget why we are in this difficult position and why we have to make these difficult decisions. It is, of course, due to the difficult state of the public finances that we inherited. That has made it necessary for our top priority to be to reduce the country's budget deficit, rather than being able to provide significant additional money for capital funding of school projects. We are now paying £120 million in interest every day of the week. Those interest payments could have been used to rebuild or refurbish 10 schools every day of the year, but we are not in that position.

Despite the difficulties we face, we have still been able to announce that the Department for Education's capital spending will be £15.9 billion in the four years of the spending review period. We know only too well that there are schools in need of refurbishment that missed

[Mr Nick Gibb]

out on the previous Government's unsustainable capital programmes. We appreciate fully that some people will feel that they have been unfairly treated. Even though we have had to take some very difficult decisions on spending, we will still be able to continue putting money into the schools estate at an average of almost £4 billion a year. I am sure that hon. Members will agree that that is still a significant sum. More importantly, we believe that it is affordable in the current financial circumstances.

It is essential that we maintain buildings properly to ensure that health and safety standards are met and to prevent an increasing backlog of decaying buildings. However, by stopping the wasteful Building Schools for the Future project, to which we were not contractually committed, we have been able to allocate £1.4 billion to local authorities to prioritise their local maintenance needs. That includes £195 million of devolved formula capital that has been directly allocated to schools themselves for their own use. In addition—the important point as far as the hon. Lady is concerned—we allocated £800 million of basic need funding for 2011-12, which is twice the previous annual support for new school places in areas of population growth.

As the hon. Lady pointed out in her opening remarks, in July the Secretary of State announced that, in addition to that £800 million in 2011-12, he could announce a further basic need allocation of £500 million to provide extra school places where there was greatest pressure caused by the increasing pupil population. That additional funding has been made available thanks to efficiencies and savings that the Department, working with Partnerships for Schools, has been able to identify in the Building Schools for the Future projects that are continuing. Officials in the Department are working on the allocation methodology for notifying local authorities of their share of that additional £500 million. The intention is to use the 2011 school capacity and forecast information that was submitted to the Department by local authorities in August 2011. By using those data, we can ensure that the additional money is indeed allocated to those in greatest need.

Bristol's capital allocation of the £800 million is approximately £9.36 million in 2011-12. In addition, in 2011-12 it has received more than £6 million in capital maintenance allocations, as well as £1.1 million in devolved formula capital. Therefore, Bristol is already due to receive £17.1 million of capital this year. Once we have allocated the £500 million, based on the 2011 statistics, other sums should be forthcoming to ensure that there are sufficient school places for primary school pupils, particularly in the Bristol area.

We have been working with stakeholders, including local authorities, to understand better their basic need forecasts and pressures. It is clear that some authorities face greater pressures, as the hon. Lady highlighted.

Stephen Williams (Bristol West) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the key point that the four MPs and the city council tried to get across to him in his office this morning is that, while there are several authorities around the country that face population pressure, Bristol's pressures are more significant than those for the family of core city authorities and indeed outstrip the population growth of inner London? Of all the family of urban centres in the country, Bristol faces the greatest pressure from demographic change, and therefore has the greatest need and perhaps the greatest call on that extra £500 million of welcome resources.

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a valid point; it was made strongly at the meeting this morning and I took it on board. A 20% increase is significantly higher than most others. There are one or two areas—such as Plymouth, I think—that have a higher increase. Nevertheless, looking at the country as a whole, Bristol is significantly high in terms of its population increase in that age group compared to other parts of the country. That will be taken into account when we analyse the 2011 data, which will be used to allocate the £500 million.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East knows, last year the Secretary of State commissioned, from Sebastian James, a full and independent review of the Department's capital programmes. That review has been published and the Secretary of State has commented on—indeed, has already agreed with—some of its recommendations. The recommendations propose a new approach to the future allocation and use of all available capital funding, including that funding continue to be prioritised to the provision of pupil places and addressing condition needs. The Department is consulting on the proposals made in the James review. In fact, the consultation ends today.

Future capital allocations and the management of funding for 2012-13 until 2014-15 will be informed by the outcome of the capital review. That was raised in this morning's meeting by the local authority and by the hon. Lady. They want a degree of certainty about future capital allocations. The outcome of that consultation and its conclusions will, I think, steer her and her local authority in that general direction. However, as I have said, the Secretary of State has already indicated that local authorities can expect that the headline amounts of capital available in future years will be broadly in line with those allocated for 2011-12. I hope that that will help her local authority to engage in a planning process to help to eradicate the shortage of places in the Bristol area.

As well as radically reviewing the way capital funding is allocated and spent, the Government are continuing to press forward with their academy and free schools programme. That includes a focus on funding an academy solution for the weakest primary schools in the country. Bristol has a number of open academies. Indeed, I had a very informative visit to Merchants' academy in July. The introduction of the academies and free schools programme should be viewed as an additional tool in the armoury of local authorities as they seek to eradicate any basic need pressures that they are encountering. By giving those involved in education the chance and the freedom they need to shape the future of our schools, and by opening up the opportunities for others to enter the education sector, we believe that we are offering an education system that will meet the needs of local communities.

The meeting this morning with the hon. Lady and other hon. Members who represent Bristol was very constructive and helpful. Officials will continue to work with local authorities to find a solution to the basic need problems facing Bristol.

Question put and agreed to.

1.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 October 2011

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

Ovarian Cancer

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr Newmark.)*

9.30 am

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. It has been a good many years since I last did so, when I was chairman of the Welsh Young Conservatives and you were chairman of the national Young Conservatives. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important subject. I am conscious that many hon. Members wish to contribute, many of whom have personal and constituency experience of the disease. It is important to hear from as many of them as possible, so I shall make my opening comments as brief as I can.

My personal experience of the effects of ovarian cancer occurred some 40 years ago, and it meant that I never knew my grandmother. In her 50s, she suffered from the disease, which sadly took her life in my first year of life. She was buried on my first birthday. Clearly, at that age I was too young to know, but she was, by all accounts, a truly wonderful lady and, due to the cruel nature of the disease, her death was a loss that impacted on my family for many years.

Some 40 years on, I was elected a Member of Parliament in 2010, and like all new MPs, I am sure, I felt somewhat overwhelmed when I came to this place. What staggered me more than anything was the volume of invitations that I received from many different charities. One stood out—that from Target Ovarian Cancer. It stood out because it informed me that a constituent would be attending a reception, and because of the impact that the disease had had on my family.

I worked in the charity sector for 16 years and, as I was involved in politics, I thought I knew how to get to Members of Parliament, but I realised how wrong I was when I saw the volume of correspondence that I received. I thought it clever of Target Ovarian Cancer to make its invitation personal by bringing a constituent down here. In June, I attended that reception and had the opportunity to meet my constituent, Chris Shagouri. She is one of those people with whom one instantly clicks; she is inspirational. I listened to her speak about how late diagnosis of the cancer had impacted on her, her husband and her family. She talked about her ongoing battle to keep the disease at bay, and it is clear that she has great determination, but it was easy to wonder how much easier it might have been had the diagnosis been made earlier.

As the reception continued, I heard, time and again, moving stories from other women about their experiences. That and Chris's persuasive manner convinced me to support the all-party group on ovarian cancer, which was being set up.

Sadly, diary clashes have restricted the number of meetings that I have been able to attend, but it is impressive that they are regularly attended by women who reinforce over and again the message that early diagnosis is necessary. At the most recent meeting, we heard again from women from throughout the UK about their experiences. At the most recent reception, four women gave personal accounts of their problems, which motivated me to bid for this debate. I am grateful to have been given that opportunity.

Ovarian cancer is not rare. It is the fourth most common cause of cancer death in women after breast, lung and bowel cancers. Every year, some 6,500 women are diagnosed and, staggeringly, 4,400 die every year. Just 36% of women who are diagnosed survive for a further five years. Those figures are staggering, compared with more than 80% for those who suffer breast cancer. It is also staggering that in three quarters of women who are diagnosed, the cancer has already started to spread. Those figures are scary.

The holding of this debate prompted someone to contact me this week. They wrote:

> "My mother died aged 67 in 2009 with Ovarian Cancer. By the time she was diagnosed, the cancer wasn't in the early stages and she was given only a 2% chance of living for 5 years. She fought all the way with various treatments and lived for 7 years after diagnosis."

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising the issue. As he rightly said, every one of us can relate to a constituent or family member with the disease, and most people are aware that the cancer is hereditary or genetic. Does he believe that whenever someone is diagnosed with ovarian cancer there should be immediate checks on other family members—sisters, nieces, and daughters—to ensure that the hereditary effect is not passed on? Does he believe that that should be done quickly after diagnosis?

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful for that intervention. I agree absolutely that anything we can do to ensure early diagnosis of conditions can only help. In the long term, it is better for the individual concerned, and certainly better for the rest of the family, who go through equal concern.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Not long ago in my constituency, we ran an event to raise money for ovarian cancer treatment. An astounding finding was the number of young women aged 18 to 25 who are affected. I was astonished, because my impression had been that the disease affected older women, but it seems to be on the rise among younger women and is known as the silent killer. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that early intervention is vital? That could be done with blood tests, which some GPs have called for, and perhaps in schools, to identify this tragic killer of women.

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I will talk about early diagnosis, which is crucial, as is awareness—making people aware of the symptoms. That is crucial in the campaign to fight this terrible disease.

I return to the letter that I was quoting from, which is relevant to the point that the hon. Gentleman made:

> "I really hope the message regarding this disease can increase, as I wouldn't want anyone else to suffer as my mother did. If she had gone to her GP straight away when she presented with symptoms and the GP acted straight away, then she may still be with her family, who miss her so much."

That is a powerful testament to the problem that the disease causes.

[Stuart Andrew]

According to figures from the National Cancer Intelligence Network, only pancreatic cancer involves a higher proportion of people diagnosed with the late stage of the disease. but with ovarian cancer, unlike pancreatic cancer, we know what the symptoms are. That was not always the case. The hon. Gentleman referred to it as the silent killer, which is often how it is referred to, but in most cases the symptoms go unrecognised for some time by the women or their GPs. It is alarming that Target Ovarian Cancer has found that one third of women waited six months or more after visiting their GP for a correct diagnosis. That is staggering.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has published guidance on the recognition and initial management of ovarian cancer, and listed symptoms such as persistent bloating or increased abdominal size, abdominal or pelvic pain, difficulty eating and feeling full quickly, and the need to urinate more frequently. If women experience such symptoms frequently, particularly more than 12 times a month, they should undergo tests.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Under NICE guidelines, the first thing that should be done is a CA 125 test. Is the hon. Gentleman concerned that there are apparently restrictions on a GP's ability to obtain that test for their patients, and importantly that there have been attempts block those tests from being carried through to pathology laboratories? The CA 125 test is the one thing that can spot the disease and increase the possibility of early diagnosis and greater chances of success.

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful for that intervention, which proves the need for the debate. I hope that we can take forward many of the issues raised today to try to tackle the disease. The hon. Gentleman's point is incredibly valid and important.

NICE's information is a step forward because it offers women, and importantly GPs, the chance to distinguish between ovarian cancer and more common but less serious conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome, which is the most common misdiagnosis. The ovarian cancer awareness measure, which is an accredited tool used by Target Ovarian Cancer in its pathfinder study, showed that only 4% of women felt confident of spotting the symptoms of the disease, and just 9% were aware that persistent bloating is the most common symptom of ovarian cancer. Compare that with 76% of women who recognise that a lump is the most common symptom of breast cancer.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that because of the specificity of the symptoms of ovarian cancer, there is a case for a specific campaign to raise awareness of the disease, rather than relying on a generic campaign, which is the approach that the Government have tended to favour so far?

Stuart Andrew: The hon. Gentleman is in danger of stealing my thunder, but I am glad that he has emphasised my point before I have made it.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important matter before the House. He is right to highlight awareness, but there is also the need for better information for women and their families following diagnosis. A close relative of mine was diagnosed with the condition, but there was a lack of knowledge of where to find more information about it. That led me and others to look online at a condition that was similar, but had a very different five-year survival rate. That caused a lot of unnecessary anguish to close family members.

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend raises a valid point. I worked in the hospice movement for about 15 years, and time and again we heard from parents of children at the hospice or patients in the adult hospice that when they were told of their disease, they almost went blank; they heard not the rest of the information, but just the dreaded diagnosis. It is crucial that people are given as much information as possible to take away and digest later.

As I said, 76% of women recognise the most common symptom of breast cancer, but there is clearly a lack of understanding about the significance of symptoms that they may experience due to ovarian cancer. Furthermore, GPs are not picking up the disease quickly enough. Just 22% of women are urgently referred to the two-week cancer referral route, and the rest are either sent away, or treated or referred inappropriately. Late diagnosis has been identified by the cancer benchmarking study, funded by the Department of Health, as a key driver for the poor ovarian cancer survival rates. That study seeks to understand the differing survival rates between countries for breast, lung, bowel and ovarian cancer. For some reason, despite the findings, ovarian cancer was the only cancer in the study not to be included in subsequent awareness campaigns. A large majority of women who are diagnosed in the later stages of the disease will experience recurrences, and many will develop resistance to chemotherapy.

My constituent, Chris Shagouri, is undergoing treatment yet again to try to slow the progress of the disease. Her strength and commitment to help to improve the lives of women who are diagnosed with ovarian cancer is amazing, especially when she could be forgiven for wanting to concentrate her efforts on herself and her close family. Chris Shagouri is representative of the many women who have attended meetings of the all-party group on ovarian cancer, and who share a determination to change the status quo. They often say that if just one woman gets a quicker diagnosis it will have been worth it, because for that woman this really is a matter of life and death. I hope that we can reach a better total than just one woman.

Treatments for ovarian cancer are highly intensive and invasive. An American study showed that, compared with women who have breast cancer, those with ovarian cancer spend nearly 10 times as long being treated in hospital in the first year after diagnosis and the last year of life. There have been no new life extending treatments for women with ovarian cancer during the past 20 years.

Why do members of the all-party group on ovarian cancer want to have this debate? Because we feel that, right now, an important opportunity to make much needed progress is being overlooked. I welcome the Government's work, and commend them for it, with the cancer drug fund and the palliative care strategy —it was long overdue. In January, the Government published their new cancer strategy, which contained a strong commitment to improving early diagnosis and a multimillion pound investment in cancer awareness campaigns—fantastic stuff. It initially included regional breast, lung and bowel cancer campaigns, and recently we have heard that a national bowel cancer awareness programme will be rolled out next year, following the success of the pilots. New campaigns on oesophogastric cancers, and kidney or bladder cancer, will be run at a local level. The all-party group remains frustrated that ovarian cancer is not included in that admirable work.

The Government are committed to saving more than 5,000 lives a year from cancer by 2014-15, and women with ovarian cancer could represent 10% of that figure. Each year, up to 500 women lose their lives unnecessarily to ovarian cancer because we do not do as well as other European countries. The Government's study showed that late diagnosis is a key driver of deaths from ovarian cancer in the UK, and it is curious that the condition was not included in the awareness campaigns in this country.

Why can an awareness campaign on ovarian cancer not be started now, even in pilot form? We applaud the Minister for the commitment to improve people's chances of surviving cancer, but urge him to include ovarian cancer in the awareness work that is being done. Every day we wait, another one or two women, like my grandmother or such as Chris Shagouri, and many others who have been campaigning will lose their lives unnecessarily. As a matter of urgency, I ask the Minister whether he will consider an awareness campaign and whether he will meet with representatives from the all-party group on ovarian cancer to discuss how we can take such a campaign forward and stop other women suffering in future.

9.49 am

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I should start this speech by telling the House that I should be dead, because only two out of every five women with ovarian cancer survive beyond four years and my cancer was diagnosed eight years ago, at the start of 2003. I remember the dates well. Throughout that autumn term, I had been on a very serious diet. As hon. Members know, I need to do that, and I was completely unaware that the loss of appetite that was caused by my cancer was being helpful to my dieting. At the end of that autumn term, I went to see my GP about symptoms that actually were irrelevant to the cancer, but she is a very insightful woman. She took a very careful history from me and did a CA 125 test. This was about December. She referred me and I did the CA 125 test. I remember the dates fairly well because it was just before I went away for a Christmas holiday. The level was elevated. Of course, I had no idea how significant that was. I cannot remember what it was at that point—45 or something like that. I said, "Is that serious?" She said, "Well, yes." I did not quite work out how serious it was, but she had referred me to a specialist. I came back from my Christmas holiday and had an intravaginal ultrasound in January. I went to see the doctor about the results and was told on, I think, 15 January that I was going to have a hysterectomy in an operation that might be related to cancer on 14 February—not a date one forgets.

Although I was late detecting the symptoms and, indeed, the symptoms that I went to see my GP about were not symptoms caused by my cancer, it was a very short time before I had an intervention. In fact, it was quicker than that. It was this time of day on a Wednesday. The day before, we had lost, by just three votes, a cross-party vote on an 80% elected House of Lords. Those three votes were hon. Gentlemen who had had too good a dinner. I was trying to do press and so on about the House of Lords vote. I was trying to get across the point that a majority of the House of Commons thought that we should have an 80% elected House of Lords, but some hon. Members went in the wrong door because they cannot manage when they do not have Whips telling them where to go. Those calls were interrupted by a telephone call from St Thomas' hospital, which said, "We have a cancellation. Can you come in today?" I burst into tears. Then I went to the Army & Navy Stores and bought a nightie and a pair of slippers and set off to St Thomas' hospital.

As can be imagined, I arrived at the hospital not with my head in the place where a cancer patient needs it to be, but still trying to sort everything out, because although I had known that I was to have the operation, it was originally to take place about two weeks after the House of Lords vote that I was working towards. So I arrived all shouty and dictating things, putting out press releases, bellowing into a phone and so on. I was put in my bed and was still shouting down the phone, but then this woman came up to me, took my hand and put it in a bowl. I was on the phone and I said to her, "What are you doing?" She said, "I'm giving you a manicure." I said, "Why?" She said, "I'm a volunteer. I come into the women's ward in St Thomas' hospital on a Wednesday and give women manicures." I have told the Minister that story because that volunteer helped me through the experience, as I stopped being an MP and started facing being a patient. I strongly urge the Minister to recognise how powerful such roles, which do not look clinically essential, are in the care of people. That is my first message.

My second message is that my story tells us how good the NHS can be—how fast it can respond. In my case, it was eight to 10 weeks between first going to the GP—and not reporting the right symptoms—and having an operation. One cannot ask for better than that. I know that a big reason for it was the targets that we had set, because when I was told when my operation would take place, the consultant said to me, "Oh, I'm bumping up against the date." I therefore urge the Minister both to look after the role of volunteers and voluntary organisations and to retain those targets that put pressure on the system to help people like me to live.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on initiating this important debate. Does the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) agree that although it is wonderful that she had such rapid access to treatment, such access to diagnosis is not uniformly available throughout the country? My experience is that it is difficult for general practitioners to gain rapid access to ultrasound scans, which was a crucial factor in the hon. Lady's diagnosis. Equally, access to CA 125 measurements, although included in the NICE draft guidelines, which is welcome, is not uniformly available to GPs throughout the country.

Fiona Mactaggart: The fact that those things are not accessible is condemning women to die. It is very simple, and they are not complicated tests. I have had an awful lot of CA 125 tests because women have a lot before

[Fiona Mactaggart]

and a lot afterwards to see what is happening to the markers in their blood. It is a very simple test and certainly should be available in primary care so that GPs can do it quickly and reassure themselves and their patients. It was thanks to Ovacome that I began to realise how important knowing one's CA 125 level is. Until I started reading the educative materials produced by voluntary organisations, I did not know that.

I want to say one thing about all the voluntary help available to people with cancer. It is very confusing. People never really know who does the thing that they need—who provides the help. Today, the question might be, "Should I wear a wig, or are they all horrible and uncomfortable?" The answer is yes, by the way. It might be, "Do I need someone to hold my hand and explain what's wrong with me?" People do not know these things. I wish that somehow all the wonderful charities could get together and have one doorway through which the patient goes and can say, "This is what my life's like. I can't afford to park at the hospital" or "The wig that I got is itching" or "Is my reaction to chemotherapy appropriate? Do other people have it?" Who are the right people to help? People in this situation never know who the right people are, so one thing that I wish the Department of Health would do is find some way of resourcing those organisations to provide a better entry to their services for people with cancer.

However, I want to focus on diagnosis and helping people to detect their symptoms early. I did not detect mine particularly early; indeed, it was my GP who detected them, not me. Many hon. Members have written to the Minister, and at the annual general meeting of the all-party group in July we considered the response that he had sent us. Frankly, to me, it seems that the message is not getting through. The work being done to improve early diagnosis of cancer, particularly awareness, will not make a difference to the women who have ovarian cancer. I am very glad to receive an account of the work being done on breast, lung and bowel cancer, but frankly it is a bit insensitive. Someone who is concerned about ovarian cancer will see all those wonderful information campaigns on other cancers, but none of them applies to the symptoms of ovarian cancer. That will not do, and it particularly will not do when ovarian cancer is such a killer.

In the letter to the all-party group, the Minister said that

> "future activity will depend on the success of the Be Clear on Cancer campaigns".

His Department has since announced that following the success of the regional pilot campaign for bowel cancer, it will be rolled out nationally. Now that we know that those awareness campaigns work, when will we have a commitment to work on ovarian cancer? We have extended the work to include stomach, oesophageal, bladder and kidney cancer. Why not ovarian cancer? It was not until long after I had had a hysterectomy, chemotherapy and so on that I realised which of the symptoms that I had had were clues to my cancer. We really must help people to know that they are at risk. Ovarian cancer is the fourth most common cause of cancer death in women. Is it just because it affects women that we are not seeing action? If men had it too, we might be doing better, although, of course, we have a good history on breast cancer.

I worry that ovarian cancer is being put in the "too difficult" box, and it is not acceptable to do that with the most fatal gynaecological cancer. Ovarian cancer kills four times as many women as cervical cancer, for which we have a national screening programme. Is it not time that we put in place a national screening programme for ovarian cancer and gave GPs and others proper access to diagnostic tests that will save thousands of women's lives? It is not acceptable that so many women die of this cancer when we know how to stop it, and I urge the Minister quickly to put in train action to deal with this issue.

10 am

Mr Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow such a powerful speech. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew). We have worked together before, and he is getting quite a reputation for calling good debates in this place. I pay tribute to him for bringing this issue before us.

Like my hon. Friend, I come to the House with many experiences, which have shaped my life thus far. Cancer—not just ovarian cancer—has touched my life many times, and I have fought it many times. So far, it has won more times than I have, and such experiences shape the work that I do in the House.

In the next few minutes, I will not rehearse the arguments we have heard or repeat the statistics that my hon. Friend set out, but I will reinforce some of the things that have been said. Clearly, the most effective way of promoting awareness and understanding of the symptoms of ovarian cancer is to raise its public profile, and I hope that this debate will, if nothing else, go some way towards doing that.

I am a member of the all-party group and I pay great tribute to Target Ovarian Cancer and cancer charities generally, which do such an excellent job on this issue. I, too, have been struck by how effective they are as a lobby and by how powerful they are; the fact that so many Members are here today and that so many are interested in this issue is testament to that.

I thought that I would give Members a few reflections on my role as co-chair of the all-party group on breast cancer. I hope that is not insensitive; it is meant to be helpful, because there are really powerful lessons to be learned from the fight against breast cancer, and I hope that they can help women with ovarian cancer.

Thirty years ago, the breast cancer survival rate in this country was barely 50%; today, it is more than 80%. My goodness, that is testament to the effort that has been made. There have been many debates in the House, which have played a tiny role. There has also been funding, and large amounts of research and expertise have been applied to the issue. Awareness, too, has been critical. Similarly, there have been new treatments and a screening programme. All those things have made a difference, and they have all been essential to the significant progress we have achieved.

What has been key, however, has been the number of women who have been prepared to stand up and put their personal experiences on the record to keep breast cancer high on the nation's agenda. Obviously, there have also been some high-profile deaths. There are so many to list, but what struck me, and it is often quoted, was when Linda McCartney lost her fight against the disease. So many women had grown up with the McCartneys, and her death did so much to place breast cancer on the agenda.

Breast cancer ambassadors continue to play a crucial role in raising awareness by sharing their personal experiences and promoting cancer campaigns in their local areas, as well as nationally, through the national media and through this place. That really brings home issues of which people might otherwise have remained unaware. It was not always the case that women immediately thought a lump might mean breast cancer; that was due to a huge amount of hard work and a huge number of awareness campaigns. The ambassadors really filled the gap effectively, and I hope we can see more of that in the fight against ovarian cancer.

As a member of the all-party group on ovarian cancer, I know that some representatives of the charities might be thinking that the lack of survivors makes fighting this disease more difficult, but that is a reason to try harder, not to give up. The lack of survivors means that people such as the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) and other Members who take part in debates such as this are more important than ever in raising the issue and in keeping it high on the political agenda, and we will raise it again and again.

The high number of fundraising and public awareness drives promoted by the Department that the Minister represents, as well as politicians' willingness seriously to grapple with the issue, have meant that the fight against breast cancer has retained its high profile, to the benefit of tens of thousands of women and their friends and families. Governments have produced very effective awareness campaigns over the years to encourage women regularly to check themselves and to ensure they know what they are looking for. The TLC—touch, look, check—campaign by Breakthrough Breast Cancer, which Target Ovarian Cancer works closely with, has been incredibly effective, and TLC day is part of breast cancer awareness month, which is this month. That is another exceptionally powerful way of reminding the public of that issue and of raising awareness of the fight against breast cancer.

Such simple messages, which can be spread through the champions I mentioned, can be used successfully and powerfully in the fight against ovarian cancer. We can send a bold message that women can fight the disease and beat it, and the hon. Member for Slough is wonderful living proof of that.

Many large national studies with large research grants were carried out in years gone by in the fight against breast cancer, and we need greater commitment and funding for research grants from the Government and charitable bodies at national level in fighting ovarian cancer. By demonstrating the commitment that exists in the research community to provide the wherewithal for large studies, huge strides can be made in bringing ovarian cancer to political and public attention. Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on his Department's proposals on the future funding and commissioning of studies on the disease. Any information that he can share with us would be much appreciated.

Notwithstanding the connection between the familial forms of breast and ovarian cancer, which share the same defective genes to some extent, the age profile of the women affected is broadly similar, although, as the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) rightly said, a striking number of younger women are affected by ovarian cancer. In that respect, I received the briefing from the Teenage Cancer Trust, which was very powerful.

It is not inconceivable that the same women who take on board the messaging about breast cancer symptoms will be open to messaging about ovarian cancer. We are always told, so it must be true, that women are much more receptive to health messages than men. That is absolutely right, so we have an important opportunity to make significant and potentially life-saving progress.

Obviously, there are still huge improvements to make in the fight against breast cancer, and that is even truer of the fight against ovarian cancer—particularly in terms of diagnosis and treatment. Like other Members, I urge the Minister to take action on ovarian cancer awareness as soon as possible. Currently, we are barely getting past first base. This is a silent killer, but it is also a silent national scandal. If we achieved what has been achieved in the fight against breast cancer in the past couple of decades through raising awareness, screening and better treatments, 3,000 of the 4,000 deaths a year from ovarian cancer might not occur. That might have saved the grandmother of my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey, and it might have saved mine.

I ask the Minister please to ensure that the Government take swift action and make a start on dealing with this issue. At the moment, there is little DOH-led activity to improve awareness of symptoms among women and GPs, despite the fact that the Government have rightly committed themselves to saving the lives of 5,000 cancer sufferers a year as part of their excellent cancer strategy. I have worked closely with the Minister on the Health and Social Care Bill, and he knows that I am a huge supporter of that cancer strategy. With investment of £12 million in awareness work towards achieving that pledge, some might describe tackling ovarian cancer as low-hanging fruit.

The Minister said earlier in the year that the main focus for the Government's national symptoms awareness campaign would be bowel cancer, but he also stated that new campaigns were being piloted on other cancers and their symptoms. I hope that he will update hon. Members on the progress that his Department has made in piloting the campaigns. Including ovarian cancer in the awareness budget will help the Government to meet their targets—I am sure of that—while enabling them to improve survival rates for those with ovarian cancer, which are among the worst in Europe at the moment. If they improve, the lives of many women can be saved.

Target Ovarian Cancer gave me an excellent booklet, "An MP's guide to ovarian cancer", shortly after I was elected, and it contains a lovely quotation from a lady whom I met at an ovarian cancer reception last year. Her name is Eilish Colclough—I always get it wrong when I attempt it—and she is a mother of five. We have seen her speak before, and she is fighting terminal ovarian cancer. She says:

> "I look at myself as living not dying."

Whenever she speaks, and whenever such patients, survivors, fighters and livers come to speak to the all-party groups that I am involved in, it is always infinitely more powerful

[Mr Steve Brine]

than any Member or Minister. In my experience—and I have had a lot of it, as I have said—people with cancer are not just their cancer; they are everything else as well. I hope that we can find many more people such as Eilish—survivors—to give more proof of that, to help us fight ovarian cancer, and to drive down the number of women we lose to it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Order. We have 30 minutes left for general debate, so I ask hon. Members to limit their remarks to no more than five minutes.

10.11 am

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this important debate, which I hope will be a springboard for increasing awareness and for encouraging the Department to pick up the gauntlet set before it today.

In the next 12 months, between 11 and 15 women in my constituency will die because of ovarian cancer. That is not a high or low figure; it is the average across the United Kingdom. We must wake up to the reality and that figure must be checked. We must embark seriously on a national campaign that will achieve better survival results, as has happened with major cancers such as breast and lung cancer.

I want to put four important and sobering statistics before the House. Most of the women who are diagnosed—75%—have late-stage disease, when survival rates are very poor. That is a very high figure. Also, 30% of women are diagnosed following admission to their local accident and emergency ward, not by their GP. Women with ovarian cancer are five times more likely to die within a month of diagnosis than women with breast cancer, and the UK's late diagnosis is thought to be the key driver for those survival rates. Only 4% of women are confident that they can spot the symptoms of ovarian cancer.

I have two questions for the Minister. First, why, as the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr Brine) said, is there not yet any Department of Health-led activity to improve awareness of symptoms? That is the key to addressing the issue. Secondly, I take the view that what is not measured is not done, so why is there no national measurement for ovarian cancer?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that greater awareness and early detection were the key to the significant progress made with other cancers? Many charities became involved with departmental officials to ensure that those things became the driver, which led to reductions in numbers. That is the key for ovarian cancer as well.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point incredibly well. We have all come to realise that there is a lack of awareness because of lobby groups, patients in our constituencies and the families who come to see us saying, "Why did we not know? If we had known, we would have done something else and gone to the GP earlier."

As I have said, a gauntlet has been thrown down to the Department. Let us have better national measurement of outcomes established and followed up—year in, year out—so that the disease, which has been described as a silent killer, can be properly tackled and we can achieve the same successes as we have with breast, lung and bowel cancer survival rates.

10.15 am

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing the debate. I want to focus on a small area of it, but first I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), who gave us a very personal story and identified a key problem—the complexity of the symptoms, the fact that they are sometimes confusing and the general lack of awareness of what they are.

I thank Target Ovarian Cancer for its approach to me, which was quite personal. It was one of those approaches, which I sometimes receive, that make me think, "Ouch!" It would have been great if I had been approached by the Teenage Cancer Trust to be asked to emphasise the number of very young women who suffer, but, unfortunately, as I am approaching a large birthday, Target decided that I was in the key target group of women who really should know more. That is a key point. When I added in some other risk factors, such as lifestyle and weight, I began to scratch my head and think that perhaps I should take it all very seriously and think more closely about the symptoms that present when someone is suffering from ovarian cancer.

Despite the fact that women tend to be more aware of symptoms and keener than men to go to the GP—I apologise, as there are many male MPs present in the Chamber—they also have a serious tendency to grin and bear it, and get on with things. Sadly, symptoms such as bloating are not uncommon. I see the hon. Member for Slough nodding in agreement.

We are missing an opportunity, because by the time women get to a significant birthday they are already well used to some forms of screening for cancer. Great, next year I get mammograms as well—fantastic. That is an opportunity to talk to women about the symptoms of ovarian cancer. I do not want to appear controversial or to denigrate the idea that we need a general awareness campaign, which is important, but as any good advertising company will explain, a targeted message to the audience likely to be most affected is the best way to get something across.

I suggest to the Minister that we need to look at ways to approach the women most likely to be affected. That is not in any way intended to undermine the work of the Teenage Cancer Trust. The incidence in younger women is important and alarming, but age, genetics and hereditary disposition are the largest contributory factors in ovarian cancer, and we need to give close attention to the idea that when women are called for routine cervical smear tests or mammograms they are in exactly the right caring, knowledgeable environment for explaining the symptoms. I hope that the message will get out a little more effectively to those women who are at risk and who could contribute significantly to the Government target on reducing deaths from cancer.

10.19 am

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing today's debate. It is good to follow hon. Members who have made powerful and reflective comments.

Like other hon. Members, I have a personal interest in the issue. My mam died from ovarian cancer when she was aged just 42, in our hometown of Tredegar in Blaenau Gwent—too, too young. My two sisters were just teenagers. I want women in my constituency and across the UK to have the best possible treatment if they have ovarian cancer today, or the earliest possible diagnosis if they get it in future.

A comprehensive report on cancer in Wales is published every three years. The latest was published just last month, and there are good stats on Wales that are important. The report covers nearly 15 years from 1995 to 2009, and, as the hon. Member for Pudsey said, it notes that ovarian cancer is the fourth most common cancer in females. We have to shout that out loudly across the UK from here today and hope that it is picked up in other places—it is a powerful statistic.

As in the rest of the UK, there has been a slight decrease in incidence over time, but of the countries studied, most of which are European, Wales is top of the incidence table. Wales has an incidence rate of 18.8 per 100,000 of population, which is significantly above the UK average. I know that Wales has a larger older population than other parts of the UK, which leads to higher levels of cancer, but the particular worry about ovarian cancer is that women seek medical help only at a relatively late stage, so the survival rate is poorer than for other gynaecological cancers. The "Cancer in Wales" report notes:

> "There is no clear link with incidence and degree of deprivation"

but there

> "seems to be a slight trend towards increased survival in patients with lower levels of deprivation."

The mean age of diagnosis in Wales is 65.1.

What has particularly struck me—this has come out in today's discussion—is that women who often take responsibility for the health care of their families, particularly children, and visit the family GP do not themselves recognise the symptoms of the cancer. In Wales, 29% of the public said that they were not at all confident, and a further 29% were not very confident, in identifying the symptoms. Together, that makes a high 58%. As others have said, only 2% were confident in recognising the symptoms. Public Health Wales is running important public education campaigns on skin, bowel and mouth cancer, but not, to my knowledge, on ovarian cancer. It is important, again as others have said, that we have a wide public health campaign on the issue.

I have long experience of working in the voluntary sector, most recently for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and, before that, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. I know that the sector is fertile ground for innovation. For example, I understand that some charities in the sector have developed training programmes for women and GPs, including an online symptoms tracker called Ovacome. That will be a good initiative. Such programmes are excellent and clearly show commitment to provide early diagnosis. However, like others, I ask the Minister to give assurances that the Government will look into providing a nationwide campaign to help women to identify symptoms of the cancer and build on the important work that is taking place with other charities.

I note that there are two screening trials under way—one for women in the general population, the other for women with a strong family history in this regard, such as my two sisters. I hope that the evidence from those trials will support a national screening programme. As we know, if ovarian cancer can be caught in its earliest stages, survival rates can be above 70%, which is a strong stat. We could save the lives of hundreds of women in the UK and save their families from the pain of a premature and preventable death.

Where they live also impacts on the support received by women with ovarian cancer. The Minister will be aware of the significant impact of the clinical nurse specialists and what they can do to support women with ovarian cancer, yet the 2009 Target Ovarian Cancer pathfinder study showed that many clinical nurse specialist posts were under threat, with a lack of cover for sickness and leave, and with a heavy work load. Many women cited the clinical nurse specialist as the single most helpful point of contact throughout their cancer journey, yet in large parts of the country the nurses are sole operators, as it has been phrased. Certainly in Wales, we have experienced difficulty in providing such posts. Elsewhere, I hear of posts being frozen and sometimes not filled.

Finally, while ovarian cancer is noted with respect to the lack of available and new drugs, a couple can be accessed via the cancer drugs fund, but again, where someone lives determines whether they get access. I hope that the Minister will give us the assurance that, no matter where a woman lives, she will receive early diagnosis and access to the high-quality treatment she needs. I hope that I have emphasised the importance of increased care and support for the large number of women with that terrible condition, which is often fatal, but, if caught early, survivable.

10.25 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) for securing the debate and to all other colleagues who have contributed. In my patch, in the southern end of Cumbria, we have run awareness campaigns locally with our general practitioners on the symptoms of ovarian cancer. Most people here have had a tale to tell about how ovarian cancer has touched them, and my motivation is very personal: my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in October 2002 and passed away in July 2004. She was one of the 75% of women who are diagnosed at stage 3 or 4. It is depressing that things have not progressed even since then. I go back to the cancer strategy and the Government's announcement in January, with clear awareness and honesty that we are behind in survival rates for all sorts of cancers and that lack of awareness and lack of early diagnosis is the common theme in the failure to reach targets and save lives.

With regard to lack of awareness and lack of early diagnosis, ovarian cancer comes top of a pretty grisly league. It is brilliant that breast, lung and bowel cancer were included in the awareness programme, but I was

[Tim Farron]

dismayed, as I am sure many others were, to see that ovarian cancer was not. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr Brine) used the phrase, "low-hanging fruit". If we look at the cold stats on how we can save lives in big numbers pretty quickly, ovarian cancer is potentially the low-hanging fruit.

I will repeat quickly some of the stats already used: 500 women die unnecessarily every year from the disease; a third of cases take longer than six months to be diagnosed; and 29% are diagnosed at A and E, which shows a complete failure of the pathway. It is the fourth biggest killer of women in terms of cancer. Although I am hugely grateful for the stuff from Target Ovarian Cancer and other ovarian cancer organisations, I repeat those stats because my mum found them on the web nearly 10 years ago—and they have not got any flaming better! It is utterly depressing that the statistics have not improved in that time.

As the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) rightly pointed out, survival rates are very bad, given what they could be. If women are diagnosed early, ovarian cancer is relatively easy to cure, with a 70% survival rate. Things are so bad that, by investing now, a huge difference will be made, and we will see lives saved in big numbers in no time.

As is the case for all people in such circumstances, my mum's ovarian cancer was an appalling family tragedy, which, in many ways, brought us together. She had 20 or 21 months of extremely high-quality life following her diagnosis, and I pay huge tribute to the Macmillan nurses and to Rosemere trust at Preston hospital, who made her life bearable—indeed, made all our lives bearable, and sometimes even a joy. My mum was aware that there was a genetic potential, and her concern was for my sister, my sister's kids and my kids. I would put a plea in, with the other pleas that I will make in a moment on behalf of all of us, for effort to be put into looking at diagnosis and at the potential for genetically tracking the disease early, before it even arises.

Our collective plea—I do not see any dissent here—is for the Department of Health to act quickly to make the issue a priority and for the Minister to meet Target Ovarian Cancer, the other ovarian cancer charities and members of the all-party group to discuss a practical strategy and to invest now in a targeted awareness campaign, without waiting for the results of the diagnostic test and the trial, which I think will arrive in 2015. Two thousand more women will die unnecessarily if we sit around and wait for that. We need action now, and I would like the Minister to undertake to do just that.

10.29 am

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this important debate. I am sure that other hon. Members will not mind if I also single out my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), who gave such a personal and passionate speech about how ovarian cancer has affected her. Like so many others here, my family has been affected by the disease. My first cousin, Mary, died in her 30s from ovarian cancer, leaving behind a young son. I am sure that all of us here are aware of the impact of this terrible disease.

The recently published report "Cancer in Wales: 1995-2009", which my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) mentioned, highlights the fact that, on average, 394 women a year have been diagnosed with ovarian cancer in Wales over that period. The average number of mortalities due to ovarian cancer between those years was 237, which translates into 60.3% of those diagnosed with the disease ending up dying from it. Such startling statistics demonstrate what all hon. Members have been saying about the lack of awareness of the symptoms of this disease.

If ovarian cancer mortality rates in this country were the same as those in other EU countries, we could save 500 lives a year. That statistic on its own should make us all sit up and take notice and realise that, over many years, not enough has been done to highlight this terrible disease.

We have debated the kind of awareness campaign that needs to be run. A generic campaign is clearly not adequate in this case. There needs to be a specific campaign around ovarian cancer. As other hon. Members have said, only 3% of women recognise that increased abdominal size is potentially a serious symptom of ovarian cancer. That compares with three-quarters of women who know that a lump in their breast is potentially a serious symptom of cancer. If educating the public about the symptoms of this disease is important, of equal importance is the need for GPs to consider ovarian cancer as a possibility when patients display the symptoms.

It has been mentioned already that nearly a third of women who are diagnosed are diagnosed following an admission into accident and emergency, which also tells us that there is a serious problem.

My constituent Hazel Burrows contacted me via her granddaughter earlier this year. In her e-mail, Georgette Burrows said:

> "Everywhere you look, whether it's when you're watching your favourite soap opera or doing your weekly shop, there are campaigns for breast cancer, and rightly so. Although I do believe more needs to be done in order to make women aware of ovarian cancer."

She is right and today's debate has demonstrated that very clearly.

I will work with my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent in relation to Wales and with Mark Drakeford in the Welsh Assembly on this matter. Let me say to the Minister that all of us come into politics because, whatever our views, we believe in the possibility of changing things for the better. If today's debate has highlighted anything it is that that is possible and that we can save people's lives. Being able to achieve that rests partly with the Minister who is in his seat today.

As all former Ministers know—I include my hon. Friend the Member for Slough—we go on in a job for some time, getting our submissions from officials, turning up at Adjournment debates, reading out the speech that has been provided and then carrying on as before. The Minister cannot do that after today's debate. He must go back and say to his officials, "I want fresh on my desk, as soon as possible, a new strategy for raising awareness around ovarian cancer because what we have now is not good enough." He has that opportunity to make a difference. It is a great privilege to be a Minister—I told myself that every day I walked into my ministerial office. The Minister has a chance to save people's lives and I hope that he takes that opportunity.

10.34 am

Mr Michael McCann (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing today's debate.

Before the general election, I met a gentleman called Eddie O'Hara, who lives in East Kilbride, which is part of my constituency—at least it is until midday today. Eddie's wife, Linda, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer on Good Friday 2000. Like so many women, the diagnosis came far too late. I did not have the good fortune to meet her, but by all accounts she was a truly gifted and inspirational woman. It was in her memory that Eddie O'Hara set up the charity, Ovarian Lets Shout For Linda, to raise awareness of the symptoms and to support all those affected by that terrible disease. I cannot help but feel that those groups that have been set up to highlight the disease are filling a gap that should really be filled by our national health service.

Like the hon. Member for Pudsey, when I was elected to Parliament last year, I had to go through a Kilimanjaro-esque mountain of mail. Underneath the big pile, I found an invitation to a Target Ovarian Cancer event. I signed up and learned much more about the killer disease. People gave all sorts of statistics and views, but the big one that got me was that 75% of women are diagnosed too late. Surely that is the saddest indictment of our health service. Much more needs to be done and, as hon. Members have outlined, there are different ways in which things can be done.

Let me give a practical example of why we should do more. I met Eilish Colclough—hopefully I have pronounced her name correctly—at the Target Ovarian Cancer event last year. I do not know whether she will thank me for saying this but she is a 42-year-old mother of five. In case she is listening to this debate, I hasten to add that she looks much younger. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was 39. She had all the symptoms but her GP dismissed her fears of cancer.

After the TOC event, Eilish and her friends joined me and some other colleagues on the Terrace because she did not want to be in the company of the doctors. She preferred to speak to people who were chatting about things other than the disease. She explained in stark terms that she did not know how long she would live. She is still here, and the world is a better place with Eilish among us. She is a tireless campaigner. She brought to mind that wonderful quote of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said:

> "For every minute you remain angry, you give up sixty seconds of peace of mind."

As all the statistics have already been mentioned, let me ask the Minister what he is going to do to heighten awareness and improve treatment so that women across the United Kingdom do not have to suffer the anguish that Linda did or the anguish that Eilish endures today.

10.37 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing this important and well-attended debate. Every Member who spoke made an effective and moving speech. However, the speech that stands out for me is that of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart). We have already heard that ovarian cancer is a very serious condition and that it is the fifth most common cancer among UK women. Members have also set out the relatively low survival rates for ovarian cancer—they are around 40% compared with 79% for breast cancer. That is largely due to the fact that three out of four women are diagnosed late, once the cancer has spread. It is worth repeating that survival rates could be as high as 90% if the cancer were diagnosed at an early stage. In Hackney, in east London, the five-year ovarian cancer survival rate is only 35%, which is significantly below average.

Despite the evidence relating to lack of awareness, the rates of late diagnosis and the delays in diagnosis admissions by A & E, there is still no Department of Health-led activity to improve awareness of symptoms among women and GPs. That is despite the Government's commitment to save 5,000 lives a year from cancer by 2014. I welcome the new National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance on symptoms and the increased access to diagnostics that was announced in the cancer strategy, which mean that there will be new opportunities to improve early diagnosis. But unless women know when to visit their GP, unless the symptoms of ovarian cancer become as well known among ordinary women as the symptoms of breast cancer are and unless GPs know how to consider ovarian cancer, rates of late diagnosis and delays will not improve.

We have already heard, but it is worth repeating, that there is no national outcome measure for ovarian cancer; there are only such measures for breast, lung and bowel cancer. That is already impacting on the ability of PCTs and cancer networks to undertake awareness work about ovarian cancer, as funding for awareness work is being channelled to breast, lung and bowel cancer. That will potentially lead to a worsening of the situation, because it means in practice that there will be a decline in activity.

The quality standard for ovarian cancer will be one of the first of the new suite of quality standards to be introduced by NICE to inform local commissioners, but as yet it is not clear how the standard can be used effectively. Can the Minister tell us whether the Department of Health is considering introducing a national outcome measure for ovarian cancer? Can he also say how the Department will ensure that the quality standard is used effectively?

The Minister will be aware that the first findings of the international cancer benchmarking study—a study led by the Department of Health—showed that in the UK late diagnosis is thought to be a key driver of survival rates, which are poor compared to those in other countries in the study. However, ovarian cancer is the only cancer type in the study not to have had remedial action taken to improve awareness.

The Minister will forgive me when I say that under the last Government we saw substantial investment in cancer services and consequently outcomes improved; for instance, the survival rate for breast cancer rose from 50% to more than 80%. In the case of ovarian cancer, although the figures are not necessarily much better than they were when the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) faced the issues in relation to his mother, the survival rate has in fact doubled in the past 30 years. The commitment shown by the last Labour Government meant that in excess of 1,000 more women per year in England and

[Ms Diane Abbott]

Wales are now surviving ovarian cancer. However, the UK survival rate for ovarian cancer is still among the lowest in Europe, at 36%. If we achieve the average European survival rate, we will save 500 lives per year.

All of us, including the Minister, know that two major trials are currently taking place: the first is for women in the general population; and the second is for women with a strong family history of ovarian cancer. The former trial will report in 2015 and the latter trial in 2012. However, it is not at all certain that the findings of those trials will result in a national screening programme. Perhaps the Minister can tell the House what the Government's position is on that issue.

Cancer Research UK tells me that it is concerned that the Health and Social Care Bill, which is currently being debated in another place, risks fragmenting responsibility for the early diagnosis of cancer between Public Health England, local authorities and the NHS. Cancer Research UK's proposal for guarding against fragmentation is that local authorities and clinical commissioning groups should be jointly incentivised to prioritise early diagnosis, including shared indicators in the public health and NHS outcomes frameworks. That process should be supported by shared budgets, to ensure joint responsibility for delivering improvements in awareness and early diagnosis of cancer. In other words, Cancer Research UK is concerned that policies and responsibilities around early diagnosis will fall through the cracks. How will the Minister respond to that proposal by Cancer Research UK?

The Minister will be aware that, earlier this year, at the 12th international forum of the Helene Harris Memorial Trust, which was originated and facilitated by Ovarian Cancer Action, 50 of the world's leading researchers and clinicians in ovarian cancer came together to discuss the future for ovarian cancer research. Out of those discussions came nine key actions: improving recognition that "ovarian cancer" is a general term; better targeting of clinical trials; identifying patients at increased genetic risk; developing new approaches to identify targets for treatment; ensuring that both the tumour and the tumour micro-environment are treated; better understanding of relapses of treatment-resistant ovarian cancer; setting up international collaboration to enable tissue samples to be shared and analysed in research; developing better experimental models; and ensuring that clinical trials include measures of quality of life and symptom benefit. Ovarian Cancer Action believes that those nine actions would not only help to improve the quality of life and ovarian cancer survival rates for women in the UK, but help to position the UK as an international leader in the fight against this deadly disease. Is the Minister aware of those recommendations and what is his response to them?

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) made the point that, in the sometimes humdrum routine of the life of a junior Minister, there is occasionally a genuine opportunity to make a difference. Having listened to the informed, personal and passionate contributions of colleagues and other hon. Members this morning, I hope that the Minister will go away from this debate determined to move ahead—on the very strong basis of what the last Labour Government did and what his Government have done up to now—and actually make a difference in relation to ovarian cancer.

10.46 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Paul Burstow): Thank you very much, Mr Rosindell, for calling me to speak.

I assure the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) that I have not found my last 12 months "humdrum" at all and I agree entirely with the comment by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) that being a Minister is a privilege, and a privilege that one should use fully to serve the common good and the purposes that our constituents send us here for.

I want to try to do justice to the debate, and if I do not cover any issues that have been raised, that will purely be because of time and I will write to hon. Members about those issues. However, I will try to cover as much ground as I can.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) on securing the debate and congratulate all those who have taken part. I particularly congratulate the all-party group on ovarian cancer, which has done an excellent job in mobilising colleagues to be here in Westminster Hall today and to be persistent and persuasive in their arguments on the issue.

As others have rightly said, the speech by the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) was typically powerful and typically persuasive. I think that I have served in the House as long as the hon. Lady, and during the time that she fought her cancer I certainly admired the way that she did so, while continuing to provide the service that she gives to her constituents and the House. She made a very powerful set of points today.

I think that everyone who has spoken in the debate has been touched by ovarian cancer. I had not planned to refer to my own experience, but, given that others have talked about their experiences, I will say that my aunt died of ovarian cancer some years ago. Having fought the disease for some time, she sadly died at the Royal Marsden hospital, despite receiving excellent treatment there. Ovarian cancer touches many of us.

I thank Target Ovarian Cancer, Ovarian Cancer Action, Ovacome and the Eve Appeal, which have all done an excellent job in raising MPs' awareness of ovarian cancer, in the ways that the hon. Member for Pudsey and others have described today. That work has done a lot, not only to initiate debates in this place, but to assist us as MPs to play our part in our communities to help to raise awareness of those issues.

I could rehearse the statistics again, but will not do so because they have already been well rehearsed and powerfully illustrated with personal stories. I certainly recognise the urgency that we need to attach to our fight against cancers and I particularly note the points that have been made today about ovarian cancer. That is why we urgently came forward with the strategy that we published in January and why we have been fast in trialling and rolling out awareness campaigns. I will say more about those awareness campaigns shortly.

As has been pointed out, late diagnosis is one of the main reasons for the relatively poor cancer survival rates in England. I must crave the forgiveness of those colleagues who have spoken today from the perspective of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. They all made important points and they need to continue, as I know they will, to raise them with their colleagues in the devolved Administrations who have responsibility for health.

Research by the National Cancer Intelligence Network showed that nearly a quarter of all cancers are diagnosed through an emergency route, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said. That is at a stage when the cancer is very advanced. The research also showed that one in five patients did not visit their GP before being diagnosed with cancer. Diagnosis of ovarian cancer often comes late because the symptoms in the early stages—they have been powerfully set out—are often ignored or thought to be something else.

The hon. Member for Slough talked about volunteers, and about the volunteer who did the manicure on that day when her head was in another place. I have visited hospitals where Macmillan Cancer Support and other voluntary organisations play a part. Such volunteers bring back the key human dimension, which the hon. Lady was absolutely right to underline. We will ensure that the role of volunteers in the NHS is valued by including that point in the Department of Health's message to the NHS in its soon-to-be-published updated volunteer strategy.

Reference has been made to the £450 million for early diagnosis work that the Government have put in as part of the spending review. The funds will support campaigns to raise public awareness of the symptoms of cancers, encouraging people to present with persistent symptoms. They will also support GPs in more effectively assessing people with possible cancer symptoms and improve access to diagnostic tests. In 2010-11, we ran local cancer awareness campaigns and a regional pilot campaign for bowel cancer, and in 2011-12 we are running a national campaign on bowel cancer, a regional campaign on lung cancer and 18 local campaigns to raise awareness of breast cancer among women over 70 and of the symptoms of some less common cancers.

A question that has been rightly put is, why, so far, have we not addressed ourselves to ovarian cancer? Understandably, Members want answers, not least because of the evidence that if we were performing at, I believe, just the average of our European neighbours—certainly if we were matching the best of them—500 additional lives would be saved every year. We are considering whether there is scope for piloting ovarian cancer awareness campaigns, drawing on the experience of our more generic campaigns on blood in urine, which can be a marker for bladder and kidney cancers, and on the evaluations of awareness campaigns on specific disease sites. That will inform us how we can most effectively roll out further campaigns. I give that undertaking, and I am more than happy to meet with members of the all-party group.

The hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) spoke very persuasively about the scope for using existing screening programmes to deliver awareness-raising messages about other cancers, and ovarian cancer in particular, and we will consider how we might implement such a practical solution. Nevertheless, I hope that hon. Members appreciate that awareness raising is just one of a range of actions and that we need to look at the other aspects of the strategy that we set out earlier this year. We are working on other fronts to try to drive up earlier diagnosis and treatment.

A key focus of the cancer outcome strategy is primary care, which is why we are investing in providing GPs with practical tools for assessing patients who might have cancer. In addition, some of the cancer networks are reviewing referral pathways to help to shorten the time taken for patients to access diagnostic tests. I welcome the contribution of the cancer charities that have been working with primary care professionals to promote early diagnosis of cancer, and I specifically pay tribute to Target Ovarian Cancer, which, in partnership with BMJ Learning, has produced an online GP learning tool that covers the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer, and diagnostic tests based on the latest evidence.

Ms Abbott: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Burstow: I want to try to do justice to the debate and ensure that I get to answer a couple more of the questions posed, but I will give way in a moment if I can.

If a GP suspects cancer, it is vital that they can refer people urgently for further tests, using the two-week referral pathway. For women who do not meet the criteria for that pathway for suspected cancer but have symptoms that require investigation, we are providing additional funds over the next four years to support the diagnosis of ovarian cancer by giving GPs direct access to four key diagnostic tests, including non-obstetric ultrasound. Questions have been asked about what data are collected. We plan routinely to collect data on GP usage of the four tests and to publish them alongside data on GP usage of the two-week referral pathway, so that we can benchmark performance and expose areas that are not performing as well as others.

Several hon. Members asked about the CA 125 test and suggested that there are restrictions. I can assure Members that if there were restrictions we would challenge them. Just last month, Bruce Keogh, NHS medical director, wrote to strategic health authorities to raise questions about general access to diagnostics, and David Flory, deputy NHS chief executive, reiterated in the September edition of *The Quarter* that there must be no "arbitrary restrictions on access". That would apply to the CA 125 test, not least because it is clearly covered in NICE guidance.

Hon. Members referred to the two ongoing trials, which are evidence of the research taking place. The UK collaborative trial of ovarian cancer screening offers real prospects for a screening tool, but on screening the Government of the day take the advice of the UK National Screening Committee, which considers the evidence from trials of the sort going on at the moment. A randomised control trial of 200,000 post-menopausal women aged between 50 and 74 is studying the use of annual CA 125 blood tests as a way to identify—along with annual trans-vaginal ultrasound—which women are most at risk of ovarian cancer. The results of the study will be available in 2015, and the Government will then respond to the recommendations that the UK National Screening Committee makes on the basis of the evidence. I hope that there will be a positive recommendation that enables us to roll out such a screening programme.

[Paul Burstow]

Familial ovarian cancer screening was referred to early in the debate, and a study has shown that up to 10% of ovarian cancers can be attributed to an inherited genetic predisposition. It was mentioned that the results of that research would be available in 2012, but we understand that the study will close in 2013. We would want to act on the evidence from that study.

Research, therefore, is taking place in those two fields. High-quality applications are the key to getting research funding; we do not fund solely on the basis of something being a priority. The hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington asked about Ovarian Cancer Action's nine recommendations, and I will respond to her in writing, with copies to colleagues.

National measurement was mentioned. The NHS operating framework for England for 2011-12 requires that cancer registries record the stage of cancer, which is a key proxy for predicting outcomes, and publish one-year, as well as five-year, survival rates. We are benchmarking, providing a useful way to see who is performing well and who is not, and, as the hon. Lady mentioned, we are in the international benchmarking partnership with other nations. Would she like to make her intervention in the remaining time?

Ms Abbott *indicated dissent.*

Paul Burstow: In conclusion, I hope that I have responded positively to the debate. We must make progress on a broad front in this area to improve early diagnosis and get the treatment that people need, so that we can cut the death toll in this country from all cancers. Ovarian cancer is, and will continue to be, a priority for this Government.

Innovation (NHS)

11 am

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I requested this debate in order to raise important issues about the ongoing review of how the national health service extracts the full potential from innovative, commercially realisable ideas generated by NHS employees and to seek clarification from the Minister about the scope of the Carruthers review of innovation in the NHS announced this July.

I was led to the subject by my involvement with Odstock Medical Ltd in my constituency, a company that has grown from Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust. OML has pioneered a technique called functional electrical stimulation that produces contractions in paralysed muscles by applying small pulses of electrical stimulation. Having experienced it myself, I can attest that it assists walking. OML has developed a range of neuromuscular stimulators to improve the functional ability of people with neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis. The devices have been developed during many years of collaboration among clinical engineers, clinicians and patients at the National Clinical FES Centre at Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust.

Last year, it came to my attention that, because OML is partly owned by the local NHS foundation trust, under EU rules, it cannot be classified as a small or medium-sized enterprise, and therefore cannot access grants and support through normal Department for Business, Innovation and Skills channels. That seems ludicrous. I met the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), who has responsibility for small business, along with Professor Ian Swain from OML. Little progress could be made, although attempts were made to access specific funds and schemes. It is a systemic failing.

Anxious to overcome that barrier and explore other aspects of innovation in the NHS, more recently, I met with Alun Williams, the CEO of NHS Innovations South West, who has an office in my constituency and is here today. Alun is wholly committed to the NHS and is passionate, as am I, about finding ways to develop streams of revenue for the NHS. I thank him for his support and advice as we have discussed the subject in recent months.

My key concern is this: as populations age, as the cost of drugs and treatments rises faster than inflation and as medical science, thankfully, finds ever more treatments for human ailments and medical conditions, the NHS must be more radical in exploiting the bright ideas of its staff to ensure that the commercial potential of those ideas are realised fully by the NHS.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this enormously important debate. I was brought to the subject by NHS Innovations South East. Does he agree that NHS staff can come up with innovations—examples cited to me include improvements in child protection investigations and adolescent mental health programmes—that do not readily or easily translate or crystallise into commercial benefit? Is it therefore not short-sighted for the Government to insist, as I understand they do, that innovation bodies must be totally self-supporting commercially?

John Glen: I certainly contend that there are significant pockets of innovation. The challenge is bringing those ideas to their full commercial potential and getting them into the NHS so that they are cheaper for the user. The adoption and uptake of NHS-grown ideas is not wide or deep enough, few hospitals showcase their ideas and the wider benefits are not really felt across the NHS. Some ideas, when fully exploited, might realise significant streams of revenue, easing the cost pressures that I mentioned.

The review led by Sir Ian Carruthers, announced at the beginning of July by the Department of Health, will seek in its report next month to inform the strategic approach to innovation in the modernised NHS. However, it must not simply set up another framework or broad aspirations; it must deal convincingly with the gritty realities of what is needed to take a proven idea that has been honed, challenged and assessed by the innovation hubs to its full commercially realised potential.

The report must also recognise that, unless a way is found to invest in such ideas, their commercial potential will be exploited by private sector entrepreneurs who can move more rapidly and access finance more quickly. Intellectual property will thus be patented not by individual NHS trusts, as is desirable, but by the private sector, which will then charge the NHS for products and services at rates that the NHS would rather not pay. I urge the Minister to push the boundaries and ensure that we do not risk allowing the ideas of excellent NHS employees to be lost, thus losing the value and savings that could accrue.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that, although it is important for the NHS to realise the commercial value of innovation, it is also fundamental to the improvement of patient care that innovations take hold more rapidly? Did he see this morning's comments by Professor Williams, president of the Royal College of Surgeons, who warned of a 20-year wait before innovations start saving lives if we base innovation progress on previous experience? He cited reduced deaths from bowel cancer as a result of keyhole surgery, which took years to become widespread practice.

John Glen: I thank my hon. Friend for that extremely helpful intervention. I met Professor Williams last week, and he made that point to me. That is the hub of the matter. If the NHS does not move quickly on such ideas, someone else will, and it will cost more. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The impact on outcomes is negative. We must move matters forward so that the advantages can accrue to the NHS.

It is important to realise that, in the big picture of NHS politics, there is an almost pathological fear of doing anything that could imply the use of the word "cut" or the even more toxic P-word, privatisation. I am not arguing for either, but I am saying that, unless we adopt savvy practices to incubate and develop proven concepts more speedily, I fail to see how the NHS can deal with the increasingly more intense systemic supply and demand pressures that it will face. Efficiency savings and ring-fenced budgets, although welcome, will not be enough to save the NHS and provide the money that it needs to continue in its present form. We need more realism about that and a radical solution that has the potential to create more money.

I recognise that it should not be the NHS's primary objective to develop income streams from medical devices, new treatments or services. Equally, given that great ideas are an unintended by-product of taxpayer investment in providing a world-class national health service, it would surely be wrong not to look hard at making innovation work to the NHS's advantage. So many ideas derive from employees whom the state pays quite handsomely.

Furthermore, after initial investment, funding innovation could be self-financing, using royalties from previous successful investment. It just needs to unlock that potential. Alongside producing efficiency savings, this significant reform need not require significant capital outlay at the outset.

It feels as though successive Governments have been so concerned to avoid the tag of allowing the waste of capital on ideas that do not immediately point to a return, or being portrayed as blurring the boundaries of the NHS, that they have not fully established the means and mechanisms of making ideas realise their potential. Lip service is paid to the desire to innovate, but practical measures that make it possible on anything like the scale that is possible are not in place. It is more a question of whether the NHS can afford not to exploit the potential savings and revenue streams presented by these ideas.

I am aware that the current position is not completely bleak. The Minister will be able to cite a pipeline of ideas and he will know that the UK has established capabilities in this field. The medical device sector alone makes a significant contribution to the UK economy, with an industry turnover of £13 billion and 55,000 employees. That industry, however, is generally a supplier to the NHS. We need to move to a situation in which the NHS itself generates devices that can save—with a small s—the NHS from bearing the full commercial costs of products that the private sector has developed in its place. Why is it not possible for the Government to establish an innovation strategy with a real focus on extracting value from the pipeline?

I am not suggesting that there should be centrally driven, random speculative investment of taxpayers' money in half-baked ideas suggested by any clinician. The regional innovation hubs are already primed to sift ideas. For example, NHS Innovations South West has criteria that each product has to meet before it can receive further assistance. First and foremost, it must bring significant benefit to patients in terms of better outcomes and quality of life. It must also be patentable. The return on investment must meet a minimum threshold and it must be commercially viable—that is, there must be an assessment of a global need for the technology, making it a worthwhile investment for commercial partners.

Once that has been established, the issue is how to develop the ideas to their full potential. Several ideas exist in the south-west. A cancer diagnostic endoscope and meniscus knee repair device are both, subject to completing clinical trials, able to meet the criteria to which I have referred. Given that oesophageal cancer is one of the fastest growing cancers globally and early diagnosis can have a significant impact on savings in the NHS, it is highly desirable that that progresses quickly. The meniscus device should significantly improve patients' quality of life and postpone the need for an expensive total knee replacement by up to five years, thereby again saving the NHS huge sums of money.

[John Glen]

My concern is that it is purely by chance that the private sector has not taken this work further. The current NHS process for capitalising on these innovations is not quick enough. There is limited access to NHS funding, and progress is inhibited by insufficient incentives and enabling mechanisms to encourage trusts to invest in such promising cost-saving technologies. Hospitals exploit these ideas elsewhere in the world and significant royalty streams accrue. They would make a recurring contribution to the much required efficiency savings that the chairman and chief executive of my hospital trust are desperately trying to find at present.

In conclusion, I believe that the NHS is a powerhouse of innovation, but that that is not being harnessed sufficiently to accrue the tens of millions that would be available to individual NHS trusts if a bolder approach were taken by Government. I urge the Minister to consider carefully the potential of the ideas in the NHS and to do all he can to ensure that the scope of the Carruthers review is broad enough to deliver recommendations that will allow the huge value that exists to be realised.

11.14 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on securing this debate on what is widely recognised as an important issue for the NHS because of the crucial role that innovation plays in the present and will play in the future. Given his ideas, views and thoughts, he might seek to arrange a meeting, if he has not already done so, with my noble Friend the Earl Howe, who is the Health Minister with responsibility for innovation.

I shall respond by first setting out the Government's approach to innovation, before looking at the specific issues that have been raised by my hon. Friend. As we all know, and as he has reiterated, we face a significant challenge. Without real change, the cost of health care will grow faster than the rest of the economy. Moreover, the quality of care in vital areas such as cancer will lag behind other countries, and the gap between the best and the worst NHS care will continue to grow. More of the same simply will not do. We cannot afford it and patients do not deserve it. We need, in other words, to innovate, as my hon. Friend has said.

Fortunately, there is a vast reservoir of innovation to tap within the NHS. It has a long history of innovation, invention and research by great people and great institutions. Ian Donald, for instance, pioneered the use of ultrasound in the 1950s. Sir Peter Mansfield's work led to the MRI scanner in the 1970s. The Sanger Institute developed the first working draft of the human genome in 2000. We continue to lead the way in cutting-edge research, as the recently announced first European trial of embryonic stem cell research at Moorfields eye hospital demonstrates.

The creative spark that kick starts the long and difficult journey from initial idea to widely adopted treatment is a precious and delicate thing. We need to do all we can to encourage that creativity within the NHS—to grow and propagate the ideas that clinicians and others have for the benefit of their patients. While we continue to achieve great things, we must always strive for more.

Innovation does not happen when power is centralised and people are told what to do, so the single biggest thing that we are doing to encourage innovation is to devolve power to clinical professionals, trusting their professional judgment and their desire to do their best for their patients.

Our modernisation of the NHS will encourage innovation in three main ways. First, it will place the patient at the centre of decision-making about their own care—informed, empowered and able to choose the best possible appropriate care—so that providers will have to innovate to stand out. Secondly, it will have a resolute focus on improving health outcomes—publishing the data and rewarding excellence—so that hospitals and others will have a powerful incentive to innovate and improve. Thirdly, it will place power in the hands of local clinicians, thereby getting rid of the huge and wasteful bureaucracy that can strangle and frustrate innovation, and let the knowledge and expertise of clinicians drive innovation locally.

That will lead to a more personalised NHS, with services tailored to patients' needs; a more integrated NHS, with solutions that tackle inequalities, improve access and deliver care closer to home; and a better quality NHS, with every provider encouraged, rewarded and incentivised to constantly improve outcomes for patients.

There is also a wider economic imperative for innovation. The health care sector, including pharmaceuticals, medical technology, research, equipment and services, directly or indirectly employs hundreds of thousands of highly skilled people in companies, from small and medium-sized enterprises to global giants, generating billions of pounds in revenues, all helping to drive future economic growth. Innovation in health care applies to everyone—scientists, nurses, doctors and managers. In fact, it applies to all those working to deliver better health, better care and better value. We must ensure that innovation is not simply the preserve of elite minds at the top of august institutions, because it is not just about the latest drugs or high-tech pieces of equipment. The spirit of innovation should be part and parcel of every part and every level of the NHS.

One of my favourite examples of innovation in action is a jug—a health care assistant in Milton Keynes decided that patients whose fluid intake needed close attention should each have a bright red water jug. That particular innovation gave ward staff a clear visual reminder of those patients' specific needs, helped them to better care for patients, avoided the need for drips, reduced the risk of infection, cut patients' stays in hospital and consequently cut the cost of their care. That is all because of a bright red jug and one very bright idea from a health care assistant.

We have also made a strong and ongoing commitment to innovation through research. The Government's plan for growth cements our commitment to health care and the life sciences as a force for growth in the economy. The Government's National Institute for Health Research aims to support outstanding individuals, working in world-class facilities and conducting leading-edge research focused on the needs of patients and the public. We have recently announced a record £800 million in additional NIHR funding for experimental medicine and translational health research. We will also streamline regulation and improve the cost-effectiveness of clinical trials, speeding up the process of translating research into better lives for patients, their families and their carers.

However, no matter how extraordinary the innovation or how miraculous the invention, it is worthless if it is not used, as my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury said. Any innovation that is not widely adopted is a tragic waste. Like many large organisations, the NHS's uptake and spread of innovation has often been slow. We need to raise our game, as my hon. Friend alluded to. We need to do more to recognise the contribution that innovators and innovative organisations make and to encourage adoption and diffusion across the NHS on a scale never seen before.

Mr Andrew Smith: In that context, can the Minister say what future he sees for the work presently being undertaken by the regional NHS hubs, especially in the area to which I alluded earlier where there might not be an immediate commercial return?

Mr Burns: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will certainly come to that matter during my comments and before we finish the debate.

A substantial amount of work is already under way, including the £60 million that has been invested in regional innovation funds, which support front-line staff to develop and spread new ideas and validate the notion that it is good to challenge the way things have always been done. The funds are massively over-subscribed and have to date given money to more than 300 projects. Further work includes the innovative technology adoption procurement programme, which aims to encourage the NHS-wide adoption of high-impact innovative medical technologies, and the innovation challenge prizes, which reward the ideas that tackle some of our big health and social care challenges, improving productivity and the quality of health care. The first innovation challenge prizes—ranging from £35,000 to £100,000—were awarded in March. Winning entries helped to reduce waste and increase the benefits of medicines, helped people with kidney failure to lead a more independent lifestyle and helped in the early diagnosis of cancer. An expert panel is going through this year's round of applications and I very much look forward to seeing the results later in the autumn.

There is also much of value in the innovation hubs, to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. Identifying, developing and commercialising new ideas within the NHS is a must, and we need to adopt a systematic approach to that. We also need to ensure that all parts of the innovation pipeline—invention, adoption and diffusion—are more efficient and effective. The NHS chief executive's innovation review will consider that and how we can achieve better value for money.

As announced in "The Plan for Growth," NHS Global is being developed to help NHS organisations to compete in the global market. NHS Global seeks to build and grow the NHS brand and reputation overseas, enabling the NHS to compete in the international health care market and to exploit the commercial value of its technologies, products and knowledge. In doing so, NHS Global acts as another mechanism to support great ideas generated in the NHS being widely accepted across the world.

In the case of the company mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury—Odstock Medical Ltd—if it has not done so already, I suggest that it contacts the NIHR's invention for innovation scheme. i4i supports product development and the guided progression of innovative medical product prototypes, and I strongly advise the company to get in touch with it if it has not done so.

The Health and Social Care Bill, now passing through the House of Lords, will place a legal duty on the NHS commissioning board and on clinical commissioning groups to promote innovation and research. Soon the NHS chief executive, Sir David Nicholson, will set out achievable, high-impact recommendations that will inform the strategic approach to innovation that is so important within a modernised NHS. We will open up NHS procurement to small and medium-sized enterprises, simplify the process and challenge them to come up with solutions to problems within the NHS. We have committed £10 million to the small business research initiative.

Innovation can never be mandated and it should never be restricted to a particular group. Innovation in health and social care will come from a wide variety of partners—for example, NHS staff and patients, private companies, the voluntary sector and academia. They all have a crucial role to play in pushing forward the boundaries in developing and dreaming up innovative products and services to meet the ever-increasing demands of a modernised NHS.

Innovation is not easy. It takes more than just a good idea to innovate; it takes courage to speak out against how things have always been. Innovators have to hold and develop an idea often in the face of opposition and keep pushing forward until it begins to bear fruit. I fully appreciate that the process of innovation can be a very frustrating time. We must encourage people, so that they do not become frustrated and give up. They should be able to pursue dreams and ideas that will bring a greater improvement to the general provision of health care and the NHS.

Let us imagine a world without antibiotics, without insulin, without cancer screening. Then let us imagine a world with a cure for cancer or where we can reverse dementia and end heart disease. Without innovation none of that would be, or could be, possible. Innovation is essential for the future of our NHS and for the future of the UK economy. I assure hon. Members that the Government will do everything in their power to continue to promote innovation, so that it can flourish and develop along the lines that we would wish.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Public Transport (Disabled Access)

[JOHN ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Earlier this year, I was visited by a group of my constituents in Wigan who were from Hunter Lodge, a facility for people with disabilities in the borough. They told me about the endless difficulties they faced in trying to do some of the simplest things that most of us take for granted—shopping, visiting friends or getting to work. They tried to go by train to a nearby town, but had been forced to travel by relay because there was only one wheelchair space available on the train. When the train arrived, the space was already taken. They were told that instead of travelling in the carriage with other people, they would have to go in the guard's van alongside the bags, parcels, bikes and other goods.

I am angry that, in 2011, that is still considered by some people an acceptable way to treat fellow human beings. Astonishingly, when I looked into this matter, I found that they were the fortunate ones. Half of all train stations do not have level access, so it turns out that they were actually lucky to even be able to get on to the train platform in the first place. Despite some real improvements—not just under the previous Government, but under the Government before that—we are not moving fast enough. The Association of Train Operating Companies said earlier this year that progress on making train station platforms accessible to people with physical immobility is far too slow, and that Network Rail and the Department for Transport need to get a grip of this situation.

I am also concerned about the closure of ticket offices, an issue that many people have raised with me. Without a ticket office, it is nigh on impossible for many people—particularly those who have sight problems, are in wheelchairs, or have learning difficulties—to even buy a ticket to get on the train. In many instances, ticket office staff are the only people available to assist people physically to get on to the train. The McNulty review recommended closing 675 ticket offices around the country. I am aware of the economic realities, but I would like to see a commitment today from the Minister to assure us that he will not sanction proposals that would leave ticket offices entirely unmanned. That is not just because ticket office staff are often the only people available to help people on to the train. Many people contacted me in advance of this debate to say that so much of the staffing issue is about feeling safe on public transport—having the security of being able to get to where they are going without being stranded, which had happened to them in too many cases.

When I secured this debate, I was contacted by young people from across the country, who described to me, in a compelling way, how they had been unable to even get on and off trains because there were no ramps available, the ramps that were available were too short or too long, or nobody was there to help them use those ramps. More than anything else, I was struck by the indignity and humiliation that ran like a thread through all those stories. They need electronic ramps on every train so that they do not have to suffer both the indignity and the anxiety of hoping desperately that somebody will be available to help them, having to make a fuss as they stand on a train simply to get off it, and, in some cases, being stranded on a train because there is no one available to help them.

Although some train companies have made adjustments that already meet the demands of the law, the situation is still not good enough. For example, Virgin Trains has three spaces for wheelchairs on its "Pendolino" service. Although that is welcome, it makes it extremely difficult for people to travel together. Is it seriously too much to ask to adapt trains so that young people, such as those in the Chamber today who are listening so intently to the debate, can go out with their friends? Is that seriously, in 2011, too much to ask? Early next year, the franchise for the west coast main line will be put out to tender. Will the Minister give me a commitment today that one of the criteria for interested companies will be the progress they make on this issue?

I am also deeply concerned that the rhetoric flying around at the moment, about people on incapacity benefit, is making an already dreadful situation much worse. In an independent survey for the charity Scope, 15% said they had suffered high-level abuse on public transport. It is a damning indictment of the current situation that the campaigning organisation Trailblazers struggled to find young people who would even take part in a recent report on the issue, because they found the prospect of engaging with public transport too distressing to contemplate. People with concessionary railcards tell me that they have been questioned to a humiliating degree on public transport about the nature of their disability, particularly when that disability is not physically obvious. Will the Minister agree to take this up with the rail companies to ensure that the practice stops urgently?

The difficulty is not just restricted to trains, although that was one of the key issues raised with me by my constituents. I have also been sent stories about people trying to travel on airlines who have been asked to pay extra charges to carry medical supplies—even oxygen canisters—which were classed as excess baggage.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): On air travel, my hon. Friend might want to comment on the practice of some airlines. Even when an air bridge is available at an airport to take passengers off without the need for stepped access, airlines use the access stairways to reach aircraft for what I suspect are financial reasons. In such situations, a person in a wheelchair often has to wait until a winch or lifting vehicle is brought out from the terminal. Apart from the delay that that involves, it is very embarrassing to be picked out in such a way when the facilities are available in the airport to avoid that. That should also be addressed as part of the joined-up approach that is needed.

Lisa Nandy: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. The example he gives highlights exactly the indignity and humiliation that far too many people must face when they try to do something that the rest of us take for granted. I am grateful to him for raising that point.

On the buses, people seem to fare little better. Half of all disabled people say that buses are a concern for them. Even something as simple as boarding the bus presents a problem. Many buses still do not have ramps and, even when they do, a common story emerges from all the reports that I have been sent from across the country of drivers refusing to stop because it would take too long to allow somebody to board, or because the space allocated for a wheelchair is taken up by a pushchair. I want to be absolutely clear on this point: I am not advocating that there should not be space for pushchairs; it is simply unacceptable that there is not room for everybody.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. This is an issue that concerns the whole of the United Kingdom, although this debate obviously relates to the UK mainland. In my previous job as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, I sat on a Committee that was responsible for bringing forward legislative change that enabled public transport, both bus and rail, to ensure access for disabled people in wheelchairs in particular, but for visually disabled people, too. That is starting to roll off the Assembly line, to use a pun, in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Lady feel that the Government might take that as an example of how legislation could be introduced and delivered, in conjunction with local councils and other responsible bodies, to ensure disabled access for those who are wheelchair bound or visually disabled, not just to public transport—bus and rail—but to taxis as well?

John Robertson (in the Chair): Can we keep the questions a bit shorter?

Jim Shannon: I appreciate that.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because he gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to some of the public transport companies that have worked hard to make real strides forward on this issue. All those examples show that it can be done if there is a will for it to be done. It is up to all of us here in the Chamber to ensure that we push as hard as we can to make this happen.

Seat belts on buses are not routinely provided for wheelchair users. I have been sent some absolutely appalling stories of the indignity that people suffer when the bus drives off too fast and their wheelchair is not properly secured. Blind people have told me of their particular difficulties in identifying which bus is arriving, and knowing when to get off. Those issues could be rectified by introducing talking buses, by introducing seat belts, by introducing more space for buggies and wheelchairs, and training for drivers.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made an incredibly compelling case. May I commend to her the campaign of Guide Dogs Cymru, "Walk a Mile in My Shoes", which I had the pleasure of taking part in last week with councillors and Assembly Members? She was talking about a joined-up approach, and that event brought home to me the difficulties experienced by people with sight loss and other disabilities negotiating city centres and getting to the bus or train station in the first place, let alone dealing with announcements and so on.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. Guide Dogs for the Blind was one of the most helpful organisations when I was preparing for today's debate. I am sure that the Minister will want to consult it further about some of the difficulties my hon. Friend mentioned.

Almost half of all bus operator revenue comes from public funding. I want to see the Government putting serious pressure on companies in receipt of that public subsidy to ensure that the changes that I am outlining today happen. We not only can use our procurement power to make this happen, but we must and should do so, and make it happen quickly. What is so strikingly clear is that laws and training are essential, but alone they are not enough to solve the problem.

Several years ago I had the privilege to work for the former Member for Walthamstow, Neil Gerrard, an inspirational MP who, among many other things, while I worked for him brought into law the Private Hire Vehicle (Carriage of Guide Dogs etc.) Act 2002. It closed a loophole in the law under which black cabs had to carry guide dogs but private hire vehicles did not. It was symbolically important and particularly important to blind people, who obviously rely more on private hire vehicles than any other form of transport, but Guide Dogs for the Blind tells me that, since then, the situation has not got much better because the Act has not been enforced. That underlines how enforcement is essential if we are to make progress.

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and on an excellent speech so far. On the subject of guide dogs, will she join me in congratulating my colleague in the London Assembly, Caroline Pidgeon, who has recently run a successful campaign to force Transport for London and the Government to lift the ban on guide dogs for disabled people on the escalators of the tube, docklands light railway and overground railway? That is another part of the whole picture.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning that, making it clear that the issue is cross-party. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which started so much, was passed with cross-party consensus, and it is on that basis that we ought to go forward. All of us ought to play our part in making things happen.

Given that enforcement is so badly needed, I would like to hear a commitment from the Minister that mystery shopping exercises should be part of the franchising agreement on the railways and that he will find a mechanism to impose that condition on companies in receipt of public subsidy. Although feedback and surveys are an important part of any organisation, what is clear from the evidence sent to me by a whole range of organisations is that feedback alone is not enough. Often people's experiences on public transport are so distressing that they do not want to relive those experiences by having to send in a survey response or make a complaint, so I want the commitment to mystery shopping exercises to be part of our agreements with such companies.

Sixteen years ago, the landmark Disability Discrimination Act was passed in this House with cross-party support, making a promise to people up and down the country that we have simply not fulfilled. We have failed many of those observing in the Chamber, and others up and down the country. A full 13 years after the regulations that breathed life into the Act came into force, it is nothing short of appalling that the situation is not

[Lisa Nandy]

better than it is. There are 12 million people with disabilities in the UK and, as we all live longer, that number is increasing. There is not only a moral imperative to take urgent action, but a social and economic one. Yet, in advance of the debate, I was contacted by Scope, Whizz-Kidz, Transport for All, the National Children's Bureau, the Every Disabled Child Matters campaign, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, the Association of Train Operating Companies, Passenger Focus, the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign and many others all expressing exactly the same concerns: not only did they say that the situation is not getting better fast enough, but many are concerned that the situation is getting worse and not better.

With cancelled station upgrades, cuts to discretionary travel and ticket office closures, we need a renewed focus on the area, and urgently. That is one reason why I am so deeply concerned that the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee has been abolished. Will the Minister at least commit to setting up a working group, with transport companies and people with disabilities represented, to drive forward the necessary improvements to public transport by the 2020 deadline? Many of the organisations that I mentioned, which are far more expert in the area than I am, have expressed real concerns to me that we will not meet even those most basic standards that we promised to meet 16 years ago. The Government have made it a real priority to get disabled people into work. Setting up a working group would at least send a strong signal that they are committed to that. If they are going to ask people to go to work, they ought to be committed to enabling them to have the means to achieve that.

One of the most shocking things that I have found since my constituents came to see me in Wigan several months ago is that many of us—myself included—live our lives blissfully unaware that such an appalling situation is a daily reality for people up and down the country. I am pleased that so many Members are present today, and that we are using our position in this House to shine a spotlight on that situation. I am concerned, however, about what happens after today. Too often in this place we have a debate, express concerns and make our views known, but nothing happens next. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that any company in receipt of public subsidy will be required to report annually to Parliament on the progress that it makes in the area? The requirement need not be onerous—perhaps an annual letter to the Select Committee on Transport, for example. However brief, it would help to ensure that those of us who have the luxury of ignoring the problem are not allowed to do so.

Finally, I want to tell the Chamber about one of my constituents, Michael. He is 15-years-old; because of illness he is in a wheelchair and has been all his life. He was born alongside the Disability Discrimination Act which gave hope to people in his situation throughout the country. Essentially, if we will not take action to meet by 2020 the commitments made 16 years ago, we are saying to Michael, "You have lived all your lifetime with these problems. By the time that you are 24 years old, you will still struggle to work and to see friends. We will not give you the freedom that you both need and deserve." We in the House are simply not doing enough to help Michael to live his life.

If we are to resolve the situation, it will require not just action but a shift in our collective mindset. It is not people with disabilities who need to adapt their lives—they have already done their bit. It is the rest of us who need to change our attitudes towards them. In the end, the question is about the sort of society that we want to live in. Do we want to live in the sort of country in which we say to my 15-year-old constituent, Michael, that we have no place for him? That is not the sort of country that I want to see. We should be ashamed, and I hope that all of us, in every part of the House, will make the issue a long overdue priority.

2.47 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on a compelling and powerful speech, even if I did not quite agree with everything that she said—but such is life.

I do not wish to pre-empt my ten-minute rule Bill next Tuesday, which I recommend to everyone, but I have a few preliminary comments. All in the Chamber know how much the concessionary fares are valued by our constituents, even if we tend to argue about them at election time. One particular imbalance, however, needs to be addressed. Able-bodied pensioners who can use the buses get the concessionary fare, but disabled pensioners who cannot use the buses and have to rely on dial-a-ride services, demand-responsive services or other community transport must pay their own way. That seems to me to be a glaring imbalance, which no doubt runs contrary to the spirit of the legislation when introduced by the Labour party—none the less, an imbalance.

I understand that certain councils choose to provide free transport for the disabled, but not every council does. With the increasing budgetary pressures, I fear that fewer and fewer will. The imbalance seems not only unfair but contrary to the spirit of equality and of human dignity. However, I realise that a spending commitment would be involved, which is no doubt frowned upon. To many of the pensioners who contact me and say, "I don't need the card; I am wealthy enough to pay myself," I make the point that people can always pay their own way—no one is forcing them to have a card. Equally, however, my constituents in Blackpool do not deserve to be treated differently from my constituents in Wyre. Everyone should have the same right to free transport and free travel, and any hon. Member who wants to support my Bill, may add their name after the debate.

One of the great honours of being an MP is the opportunity to chair the all-party group on young disabled people. Its secretariat is wonderfully provided by the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign. I am not a great fan of the all-party group system as a whole because too many strike me as unnecessary vanity projects, or an excuse to visit obscure countries that I have never heard of. However, when I was approached, I said that I would be the chairman on one condition—that the group is meaningful. I wanted outcomes, processes and reports. I did not want to sit around just talking about the problems; I wanted to hear what we could do about them. That is certainly what I got.

Report No. 1 of the "Inclusion Now" series is called "End of the Line". Leaving aside the fact that that was also the title of the Conservative party's report on coastal towns when in opposition and that that is now in the Government's bottom drawer, I welcome it because it explains what happens to many disabled people. They may want to get off at a station, but when they arrive no one is there to help them, and they may go to the end of the line, which is often many stations away, because no one will help them to get off.

The report was followed by a public hearing of the all-party group to which we invited numerous transport providers. At the start of the meeting, I said that I did not want negativity, and to hear just the bad. As the hon. Member for Wigan said, we have made strides, and if we tell train, bus and taxi companies only what they are doing wrong, they will not be encouraged to fix what is wrong.

Some dreadful cases came to light. Buses pulled away sharply with wheelchairs going everywhere, and passengers with imbalance issues were sent flying. The assisted passenger registration service limits people's spontaneity because they must give 24 hours' notice. If I had to give 24 hours' notice of where I wanted to go, I am not sure that I could live my life as it is.

The hon. Lady referred to accessibility issues at stations. I know that many of the buildings are old—they have been around for a long time—but with better creativity and a bit of thought, I am sure that solutions could be found. Perhaps the most controversial issue was staff awareness and individual members of staff who did not meet the standards expected by their own company. That is a difficult issue. Many people think that such members of staff just need more training. I take a slightly more libertarian view, because we cannot control what occurs in people's minds. I would love to make them all think as they should think, but that cannot happen. However, every disabled person who suffers should have the confidence to enter the complaints process knowing that they will be listened to, and knowing that they will not be dismissed.

We cannot have passengers being left on trains, and we cannot have staff members ignoring them at stations. We cannot have that attitude, but we must recognise that there is a problem because of the age of many of our trains, buses and so on. I often travel by train into Manchester from Preston on what is essentially a bus on wheels. I suspect that it is older than me. It is unrealistic to expect it to have all the knobs and flashing buttons that a modern train might have to enable passengers to draw attention to the fact that a disabled passenger may be trying to get off. Such technology might ease the problems for staff also.

I pay tribute to National Express, which does an excellent job in providing for disabled people. There are issues about the Government's funding of coach services that might threaten some of the subsidies, but I had better not go there. However, I have asked National Express why it does not introduce a 50% reduction card. If it has so many disabled passengers, I am sure it will keep them if it introduces a card under its own steam.

The hon. Lady was critical of the abolition of the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, but I do not share that criticism. We are having a quango cull, with many worthy bodies disappearing, but Equality 2025, which is based at the Home Office, will absorb its responsibilities, and a wider equality framework may be more effective at achieving the goals that she wants.

I do not want negativity, so I shall mention a success from the Trailblazer campaign. Carrie-Ann Fleming, who lives in Kendal, often had to wait an hour at a bus stop for the right disabled-access bus to come along. She thought that that was not good enough, so she launched a campaign and fought really hard. For once, a local council listened to someone complaining about something. That rarely happens, but it did in this case, and the council will alter the timetables to ensure that she can get on a bus without having to wait an hour.

I will close with a plea for human dignity. Some 47% of disabled people experience some form of abuse on public transport, according to Alice Maynard of Scope. She is no relation; I do not know which of us is more relieved about that. Even I have experienced abuse. I take a bus to the station every morning on my way here. At 7 am, I am often a bit groggy and a bit woolly-headed, and I do not always keep my balance when the driver puts his foot down and roars off from the bus stop. I may go flying, and on one occasion I crashed into a business lady who was not very happy about that. I apologised, and explained that my balance is by no means perfect, and that I struggle on buses. She said that I should not be on a bus if I cannot stand up straight. I just said, "I beg your pardon?" I could not believe it, because I have as much right as she does to be on the bus. It is not called able-body transport; it is called public transport. That means that we should all be able to use it, not just the able-bodied.

2.57 pm

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on the way she introduced this important subject. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). I have spoken about the issue in several debates, and I am grateful for the opportunity to make a few further points.

The starting point must be that measures to make it easier for disabled people to use mainstream public transport are simply part of a wider objective of ensuring equality for disabled people in society overall. Public transport should be accessible and affordable, so that disabled people can travel when and where they like. That is a basic principle of equality and human rights, and it underlines all that we should be doing in this area. I know that many hon. Members want to speak, so I shall make only a few comments.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan said, the percentage of the population with a disability is substantial, and the figures for Scotland are even higher than those for the United Kingdom. It is estimated that about 20% of the population of Scotland have a disability. At some stage, almost all of us in the Chamber will have a disability, which shows the scale of the issue. People with mobility issues make around one third fewer trips than those without such difficulties. Disabled people are disproportionately dependent on public transport, and 60% have no car in the household, compared with 27% in the general population. In March 2009, only

[Mark Lazarowicz]

53% of licensed taxis in Britain were wheelchair accessible, and in 2009-10, 39% of buses in Great Britain did not meet the accessibility requirements in disability discrimination legislation.

I am pleased to say that in my constituency the situation is considerably better. Every taxi, but not private hire cars, in Edinburgh must be wheelchair accessible. Two bus companies serve Edinburgh, and 100% of the buses operated by Lothian Buses, which is Britain's largest publicly owned bus company, are accessible, as are 85% to 90% of the buses operated by First Group, to be fair. That illustrates the fact that we can make a difference and that changes can be made. It is a matter of political will, as well as legislation and regulations.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing the debate. Before coming to the House, I spent 30 years working in the area of special needs and disabilities, and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) is right to say that planning sits at the centre of those issues. If we put the needs of disabled people at the centre of our planning, whether for a leisure centre, a system, a school, a college or a train, we will get it right for those disabled people, but also for everybody else—that comes from 30 years' experience.

Mark Lazarowicz: Absolutely. I intended to make that point later, but I shall deal with it now. It is essential that regulations are tightened and that funding is provided. The wonderful phrase "joined-up government" needs to apply in this area because there are many examples of simple things that could be done to improve access for disabled people. There are also examples of where the consequences of a minor local policy or local works were not thought through and had a detrimental effect on access for disabled people. I believe it would be good to retain the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, because whatever support is provided in-house by the Department for Transport, it will not have the same voice as an independent body that speaks for its users. I shall not go into that in detail, but we shall see what the Government have to say on the matter.

A lack of joined-up thinking can make a difference. For example, I have seen trains that have good accessibility, such as spaces for disabled people and a ramp that is operated either manually or automatically, so that when the train arrives at a station, people can leave it easily. However, there may be temporary works at the station—perhaps a barrier or building work has been set up, or a load of bricks has appeared at the end of the ramp—and people cannot get off. That point is not only about accessibility for people in wheelchairs; accessibility can be difficult for all sorts of people because, to put it bluntly, not enough thinking has been done on how to join up different aspects of a service.

I will refer again to Edinburgh, where 100% of Lothian Buses are now accessible to disabled people. A few years ago, a number of buses were introduced with an increased number of spaces for wheelchairs. However, there were a number of complaints, particularly from pensioner groups, because the buses would drive off quickly and people would lose their balance and fall over. The issue was solved simply by installing more rails and grips for people to hold on to once on the bus—a common-sense approach that was not thought of at the time, but which, due to consultation with local people, was resolved quickly. That is an example of the need for simple, joined-up government, as well as regulations and spending, and it is why the voice of disabled people is particularly important. There is no better way to understand where services or adaptations are needed than talking to those who use them.

I have two final points to make. First, the campaign for talking buses is an eminently sensible proposal that seeks the mandatory installation of audio and visual announcements on all new buses. The cost would be small compared with the overall cost of new buses, and that provision could be attained by amending the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000. As I understand it, the Department for Transport currently does not intend to legislate on that, but I hope that the Government will change their position. Such a measure would make great common sense and be useful to all passengers, not just those with issues of accessibility.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing this important debate. Is my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) aware that in many countries campaigns such as that for talking buses, run by Guide Dogs for the Blind, are commonplace? When I worked in Japan more than 20 years ago, talking buses were the norm and were not seen as unusual. I do not know when that began, but it is imperative that such a system is introduced in this country as soon as possible. If that is not carried out voluntarily by bus companies in receipt of public funding, strong pressure should be put on them.

Mark Lazarowicz: My hon. Friend makes a good point; I have been on buses with that facility in other parts of Europe. If regulations are not changed, the speed with which that facility spreads through the bus network will be so slow that it will take 10, 20 or 30 years for a reasonable number of buses to be equipped, if it happens at all.

Dr Huppert: Just before the previous intervention, the hon. Gentleman touched on the point that I wish to raise. A lot of the interventions that we have mentioned—not all of them, but those such as talking buses and having more grab rails—would benefit everybody. For too long, and in so many ways, we have accepted a design that is no good for either disabled or non-disabled people. The principles of inclusive design should help everybody, and we should encourage that as well as those things that specifically help some groups of disabled people.

Mark Lazarowicz: Indeed. I do not want to turn this into a debate about the advantages of publicly owned bus companies, although I am sure some hon. Members would like me to do so. However, Lothian Buses is an example of a company that, because of its nature, has the advantage of being close to local needs. The newer double-decker buses are longer and provide more space for buggies, pushchairs and wheelchair access. They are gradually introducing audio and visual announcements. It can be done; it is about making a choice and taking a decision on what is needed. I suspect that legislation on public transport might allow local authorities to specify regulations on improving local access more clearly—perhaps that point is for another day.

My final point is to emphasise the need for a joined-up approach. We will not get every bus and train in the country fully accessible overnight—it takes time to make such things happen. People on train journeys frequently use more than one operator. They may get on a train that is accessible, but change en route to a service that is entirely inaccessible. They may not have realised that and assumed, or even inquired and been assured, that the next train would be accessible. However, if it is not, they will be stuck on a station, perhaps without assistance, and will have difficulty in completing their journey. A bit more thinking and a more joined-up approach would improve such situations, although I accept that that cannot be done overnight in every part of the country.

That takes us back to the issue of equality. Every passenger, whatever their position, should have the right to start and complete their journey without unreasonable obstruction or a lack of facilities that prevents them from doing so. In spite of the work carried out by the previous Government, which I hope will be continued by this Government, the issue needs to be pushed up the agenda more often. Thinking and regulation need to change, or else, despite all the improvements, it will be many decades before we can say that we have a fully accessible transport service in this country.

3.7 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing the debate and for her passionate advocacy of a noble cause.

My hon. Friend is right: how we support and care for the blind, the partially sighted and the disabled in our communities is the hallmark of a civilised society. I pay tribute to many friends from over many years, including those I represent in my constituency of Erdington, who have battled against adversity, often in the most extreme circumstances. Their approach to life was captured by one sufferer of multiple sclerosis from Castle Vale who has been confined to a wheelchair for many years, but said, "I'm disabled, but I'm proud of being disabled." Disabled people do not want our pity; they want to play a full part in society. They expect us to discharge our moral duty to them, and for those with responsibility to comply with obligations in the law.

My hon. Friend was right to say that there was all-party consensus on some of the landmark changes over the past 20 years, including the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. However, if that is the hallmark of a civilised society, by that test and under successive Governments, our society has sadly too often failed the disabled. Having said that, this Government are moving in the wrong direction.

Today, we rightly focus on transport, and the problems with it are set out in the excellent Trailblazers report. That report includes the personal experiences of an admirable woman, Jagdeep Kaur Sehmbi—Jagz, to her friends—who is here today. She has undertaken tremendous work on behalf of those who are wheelchair bound and the disabled more generally, and she has demonstrated just what the problem is. Let me quote just two paragraphs from what she says in the report. On the issue of trains, she says:

> "A couple of times there has been no one with the ramp to help me off the train at my destination platform, even though I had informed them at the other station and been assured that someone would have the ramps ready."

On the issue of buses, she says:

> "Once the driver didn't drive up to the pavement, not because he couldn't, but because it was easier for him to drive off after the other passengers had got on, so I had to get off in the road, which meant the ramp was very steep and then I had to find a place to get up onto the pavement."

Jagz has not been deterred from continuing to travel, but it is clear from my experience that many who have such bitter experiences give up and stay at home, just when they want to play a full part in society.

The report goes on to detail its findings, and I want to refer briefly to four. First, on transport, the disabled end up having less choice and paying more. Secondly, the young disabled, in particular, feel very much that they are second-class citizens. Thirdly, disabled people cannot always access the first taxi, train or bus to come along. As a result, one disabled person told me, "I felt humiliated about being there on the pavement. Everyone else could get on board, but I couldn't." Fourthly, the assisted passenger registration scheme demands 24 hours' notice, which in turn restricts spontaneity and independence. It also fails to provide a service that passengers can count on, which again is evidenced by Jagz's experience.

Of course, there is an obligation on the companies that provide those services, and I will come to one such company in a moment. Crucially, however, the Government must also act—not only on the framework of regulation, but where there is evidence that companies are not discharging their obligations properly.

That leads me to London Midland. The company is proposing—the proposals are on the Secretary of State's desk right now—to make significant changes, including to the manning of stations. In my constituency, for example, Gravelly Hill station and Erdington station will no longer be manned after 5 o'clock in the evening. Centro has concluded a consultation process, and 18,000 representations have been made, including many from the disabled, objecting to the proposals and seeking to bring home what they would mean.

I have been working with the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Mencap and the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign to bring home what the impact of the proposals will be, and I want to give one example. The formidable Mike Hughes, who is a former police officer, is now blind. He is chair of the west midlands region of the RNIB. He tells a story about how he got off at Sutton Coldfield station at 9.30 one evening. Normally, he immediately rings for a taxi—he has two numbers programmed into his phone—but this time he could not get a signal. He was completely lost, and this is a strong, self-confident individual. Fortunately, the person manning the ticket office, who was about to close it down, helped him out and took him somewhere where he could get a signal and call a taxi. Like Jagz, Mike said, "I wasn't deterred, Jack, but I know many people like me who've had bad experiences and who were deterred from travelling."

As a result of the growing concern among the disabled, I and the organisations that I mentioned met London Midland in July. With me was the admirable

[Jack Dromey]

Rebecca Swift, the RNIB's regional director. The people we met from London Midland were perfectly decent individuals, but I hope that hon. Members will forgive me for saying that they were somewhat uncomprehending of their proposals' consequences for the disabled. We asked whether the company had consulted. They replied, "We think we did." We asked how. They said, and I kid thee not, "For example, we put up posters in the stations." Our next question was, "Posters for the blind and partially sighted?"

We then asked, "Do you think you're covered by the obligations in the law?" The London Midland people said, "Not sure. We'll go away and write to you." They wrote back and said, "We don't think we are, but in future we will act as if we were and consult properly." That was in accordance with what we had argued. The problem is that they now propose to go full steam ahead with their proposals; there has been no change. That is simply not good enough, which is why I have written to the Secretary of State asking whether he will intervene. I will say more about that in a moment.

Others have contributed to this important debate. Mencap, for example, has focused on National Express, a company I know very well. It is the biggest long-distance coach company and it is a reputable company. It is also a good employer and it is sensitive to the needs of the communities it serves. However, on 18 routes, the 30% of fares that are concessionary are now at risk because of the changes to the bus service operators grant. I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), and the reply I got today said:

> "All coach operators, including National Express, are free to continue to offer half-price concessionary travel to older and eligible disabled people on a commercial basis."

That sounds like the legendary saying by Anatole France that the rich and the poor are both free to sleep under Paris bridges at night. National Express is not a charity; it is a good company, but if it is to continue to offer concessionary fares in a significant way, it will require continuing Government support.

What is so admirable about the initiative taken by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan is that she has ensured that the voice of the blind, the partially sighted and the disabled is properly heard in the debate. I know that the Minister understands some of the issues, and when he responds to what he has heard today I hope he says how the Government intend to proceed. Specifically, London Midland cannot be allowed to blunder on regardless if the disabled are the casualties of its actions. It has not consulted properly, but the organisations representing the disabled have, crucially, offered to work with it on a consultation. That is why I have requested a meeting with the Secretary of State that involves Jagz and the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, the RNIB and Mencap. No fundamental decisions that impact seriously on public transport and, in turn, on the disabled should be taken unless the voice of the disabled has been properly heard.

3.18 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing the debate and on the excellent way in which she introduced the subject for us. The background is that 60% of people with disabilities have no access to a car and are therefore totally reliant on public transport, whether bus, train, tube or taxi. For them, public transport is of even greater importance than for the rest of the population, and that fundamental point should underlie the debate.

In London, the treatment of passengers with disabilities is probably, although it does not always feel like it, rather better than it is in many other parts of the country. That is not an accident; it has happened because we have a regulated bus service and a unitary transport authority. It has also happened because of the hands-on approach taken by the former Greater London council and, for most of the period since their introduction, by the Greater London authority and the Mayor in pushing the whole disability agenda. The Mayor's office also has a very effective advisory network that can ensure that it delivers on those issues. Under the previous Mayor, Ken Livingstone, there was an ambitious programme to convert a large number of tube stations to disability access, for which he should be commended. That is the issue that I want to refer to in a local context.

There are 11 stations—Network Rail and underground—that serve my constituency. Of the Network Rail ones, on the North London line, Upper Holloway, Crouch Hill and Canonbury have proper disability access, with ramps and so on, and all are staffed at present. With the stations that are mixed London Underground and Network Rail, there is an utterly ridiculous situation. In the case of Highbury and Islington, for example, the London overground station has disability access—it has recently been refurbished to bring in the East London line—but the underground station does not, so it is impossible to get off an overground train and on to an underground train there, because there is not proper access to enable people to do so.

Finsbury Park is a very old, busy and crowded underground station, and Network Rail, the underground and buses converge there. After a lot of argument, Network Rail has agreed to put in a lift between street level and the mainline platforms, which are well above street level. At the same time, Transport for London has cancelled its plans to put in a lift to the underground platforms underneath. Thus we have a ludicrous situation in which someone in a wheelchair, arriving at Finsbury Park station by the overground, will be able to get from the mainline platforms to the street, but will not be able to get to the underground.

I use that station frequently and every day passengers carry people with wheelchairs, and carry buggies, up and down. The overcrowding and lack of accessibility, and the danger that goes with that, are ridiculous. I hope that the Minister will pass on to his friend the Mayor of London what I have to say to him: please think again about the cancellation of the conversion scheme for a large number of London stations. It is making the lives of many people a misery and something should be done about it. The conversion needs to happen much more widely, across the network.

At other stations there is no access for people with disabilities. Those include Archway, which was also the subject of a plan from Ken Livingstone. Three stations that were due to be converted have had their plans cancelled. Highbury and Islington is the other, and only one station—Tufnell Park—has accessibility to the tube, which is by means of a lift. The situation is ridiculous, but I do not plead that case just for my constituency. I am using it as an example that could be repeated across London; it is not exclusive to my area.

My second general point is about buses and accessibility. After a lot of campaigning, London buses have ramps, and drivers are supposed to stop in such a way that the ramp can be used, enabling wheelchair users to get on the bus. Many drivers are good, reasonable, responsible and decent, and they stop in the proper place, giving people time to get on. That is fine, but unfortunately some drivers do not do it. Buses are often crowded, so often people with a wheelchair have to wait for many buses to go by before they can get on. On a cold winter's morning, it is no joke when a person in a wheelchair is stuck for a long time simply trying to get on a bus. Space is lacking, because it is taken up with buggies and other things, so while I obviously accept the point that awareness is needed, we need training to go with it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will dwell on that point for a moment. He referred to gaps in his constituency, but in the past 15 or 20 years there has been movement on the issue of infrastructure across the UK. However, there appears still to be a gap in staff training and awareness of problems. Although there has been some progress on that in the past 10 years, more needs to be done, particularly as some people do not seem to be aware of the crucial issues that affect partially-sighted and disabled people.

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely accept that attitudes, awareness and training have improved, but we need only look at the building we are in to see that we still have very far to go in achieving proper accessibility. I realise that those things are not simple, but nevertheless they must be achieved.

Outside London, where the bus service is largely less regulated, facilities tend to be much worse, and we need a much tougher approach from central Government to ensure that bus companies do as they should, bus stops are appropriate, and buses are sufficiently regulated and regular to enable people to get around. It is no fun to be waiting in a wheelchair in the cold, unable to move around to get warm, as other people who are not in wheelchairs can.

As to Network Rail, the McNulty review stated:

> "The Study recommends that the default position for all services on the GB rail network should be DOO"—

driver-only operations—

> "with a second member of train crew only being provided where there is a commercial, technical or other imperative."

How many times have we seen people trying to get on or off trains at remote or suburban stations at night, when there are no staff on the station or the train—only a driver, who cannot see everything or be everywhere? It is then a great struggle simply to get on or off a train. The McNulty proposal to go to a largely driver-only-operated service means that many suburban and rural services will have no member of staff on them, and in addition there will be unstaffed stations. That is obviously a huge deterrent to anyone who has special needs getting into the station and on to the train. I hope that the Minister will make it clear that he does not want that aspect of the McNulty proposals to be introduced.

Additionally, it is often difficult for people, particularly those with sight difficulties, when there are no staff on the station and only ticket vending machines are used. The machines are often the wrong height or badly placed. Getting a ticket and getting on the train when there are no staff becomes a nightmare. It is unnecessary and wrong to have such arrangements; they are uncivilised and we should put a stop to them.

As many as 10,000 ticket staff across the country could lose their jobs between now and 2013 if McNulty is implemented. Those people are there to help, bring security and support people. Surely we need to give a lot of thought to that, and quickly. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan on obtaining the debate, and I hope that the Minister understands that the role of the Government is to regulate and to ensure that services are provided: because 60% of people with disabilities have no access to a car, public transport is the only option for them. Buses and trains must be accessible, stations must be staffed and the staff must be trained to assist people as necessary. That is the only right and proper thing to do.

3.28 pm

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): It is a privilege to be called to speak in the debate following so many excellent speeches that covered so much ground. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing the debate and setting out the grounds for it so well. So much has been covered that those listening can benefit from a shorter speech by me. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] It is good to have support for that from colleagues.

Of course, many of us take access to public transport for granted. When a train is delayed or we wait a bit for a bus, we all grumble about the inconvenience and how much more arduous the journey is. However, for many people, a delayed train is insignificant compared with the difficulties that they face every time they try to travel. If their bus in London is diverted, they may not simply be able to use the underground instead. If they are lucky enough to be in an underground station with full access for people with physical disabilities, they can travel to only 59 other stations out of the 270. Public transport should be just that—a transport service accessible by all members of the public, no matter what their need.

Disabled people in this country have the right not to be discriminated against or harassed in relation to the use of transport services. A right of access to transport for disabled people was first set out in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, before a broader right to access was enshrined in the Equality Act 2010. However, as many disabled people know only too well and tell me at constituency surgeries and on the streets, that right simply has not become a tangible reality. We desperately need to ensure that what we have put on the statute book is embedded in reality in all local services.

I am sure that we will hear from the Minister about the work that the Government have done, but there is much more to do. Just over 50% of bus stops in London are fully accessible. That represents a huge increase, but is still a very disappointing number, given what is needed. Almost every group that represents people with disabilities has highlighted the problems with the lack of proper transport provision. We have heard several times about Trailblazers. I have met representatives of several disability groups in Cambridge. They raise those problems regularly.

[Dr Julian Huppert]

However, we must not concentrate just on people with physical disabilities. There is an idea that someone who is disabled can only be someone in a wheelchair. The issues affecting people in wheelchairs are, of course, very important and have been discussed, but disabilities are not always obvious. I want to highlight some of the particular issues faced by people on the autism spectrum, including those with Asperger's syndrome. We have a number of such people in Cambridge, which is why I raise the issue. Roughly one child in 100 under the age of 18 has an autism spectrum disorder. The National Autistic Society recently produced a very good video, which I urge hon. Members to watch. It highlights what autistic people face when trying to use public transport. That is particularly hard for them because it is not obvious that they have any issues at all.

We need to consider the issue more broadly than just by thinking about how people get from A to B. We must consider how the problem with access to transport affects people's overall well-being—their entire lives. If people are discouraged from travelling, what does that do to other areas of their lives? I am referring to their ability to meet people, form friendships, find work and pursue interests—to have all the life experiences that the rest of us take for granted. This is not just about transport; it is about everything else that happens.

Clearly, it is important to pick up a lot of the details. Many very small things could be fixed. That is why I highlighted the work on guide dog access done by Caroline Pidgeon in the London assembly. These are not hard things to do, but they are very important.

There is much still to do that requires a bit more. We need to ensure, for example, that all the Crossrail stations have proper toilet facilities. It is important to remember that something as simple as a toilet facility can represent a huge block for people who are disabled, whether because they are in a wheelchair or because they have one of the range of conditions, such as Crohn's disease, that have a huge effect—

Mark Lazarowicz: This may be an obvious point, but toilets at stations should be open. The same goes for toilets on trains as well.

Dr Huppert: Indeed. We need not only to build such facilities, but to ensure that they are open, accessible and functional. That is a very important point. There are too many instances in which that is not the case. We have a particular issue in Cambridge, although it does not involve transport. A developer wants to move the disabled toilet up a few floors in a shopping area. Of course, that would make it very hard to get to.

I will not say too much about the concerns over the reductions in relation to discretionary fares. That issue has been highlighted, and I share the concerns expressed. However, as well as the detailed changes and the infrastructure changes, which are extremely important—

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): I know that my hon. Friend is keen to proceed, but infrastructure is certainly a concern of the Chippenham Accessible Rail Transport group. The group and I have thrown our weight behind Network Rail's attempts to bring disabled access to Chippenham railway station, but Brunel's railway is considered a heritage asset. I hope that my hon. Friend and the Minister would agree that when the council consults heritage groups about changes to achieve decent disabled access on our public transport, we need those groups to get behind such proposals and work with the industry to make them a reality—they should not be allowed to become a block to progress.

Dr Huppert: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. From my role as co-chair of the Lib Dem transport group, I know that he campaigns very hard for his railways and I congratulate him on that. We have had a number of conversations on what is a real issue not just for his station, but for a number of others. There is a tendency for some heritage groups and people who work in that area to take the attitude that nothing must ever be changed, which is simply not what we want. Freezing all old buildings as they were in the '70s is not always the right thing to do. The point of public transport is not to be a beautiful monument, but to enable people to travel, and travel easily. I hope that we see more movement, which is happening with much of the heritage sector, towards the idea that we need to come up with creative solutions that enable things to work, as well as, we hope, to look good and continue that heritage. That is a very important point, and there are a number of other points that one could talk about in relation to infrastructure.

As well as the piecemeal changes and infrastructure changes, which affect disabled people on a personal level, there is the issue of planning a long-distance journey. The sheer lack of information and the complexity involved in finding information make it very hard. If someone wants to travel between two places that they do not regularly travel between and that are a long way apart, rather than within a city, they have to check the accessibility of every service, or they risk taking a tube, a train and a bus and then finding that they cannot take the next bus. It is extremely hard to plan a long-distance journey. There is a huge need to ensure that there is linked-up availability of information, whether that is available online or in other ways—different people want to use different methods—so that people know that their entire route is accessible and they will not end up at the end of the line with the problems that have been identified.

This has been a very useful debate and it has been good to see mostly cross-party consensus on what we need to do. I look forward to the Minister explaining what we will be doing to deliver on the hopes and aspirations that we all have. In some ways, the issue is simple: we need to ensure that the transport service that we provide as a nation is fit for everyone. I look forward to hearing how that will be achieved.

3.36 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, particularly as this is my first time speaking from the Front Bench. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing the debate. As ever, she spoke with great passion on behalf of those in society whose voices are too often unheard or ignored. She painted a very clear picture of the difficulties, indignities and anxieties that disabled people face in trying to travel on public transport and feel safe. It is clear from the number of people here today to listen to the debate and from the number of hon. Members from every part of the UK who have participated that there is a collective, cross-party will to tackle that inequality.

The hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) also spoke with passion, and this place is richer for his being here and speaking with the real understanding that comes from personal experience. Among the many issues that he raised, what struck me was the importance of changing attitudes. That is difficult and we cannot legislate for it, but I want to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to ensure that staff are aware of and trained to respond to the needs of disabled passengers, so that they do not face the same bitter experiences that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) described, which he had heard about from his constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Mark Lazarowicz) made important points about the practical steps that can be taken to improve accessibility and rightly pointed out that this is about not just buses, trams and trains, but airports and taxis. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) reminded us that 60% of disabled people have no access to a car and spelled out both the progress made and the challenges that remain here in London. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert) rightly highlighted the needs of people with hidden disabilities, such as autism or learning difficulties.

We would all agree that good public transport is vital to disabled people and their families. It provides access to education, employment, health care, sports, leisure and volunteering opportunities. It enables disabled people to live independent lives. It helps to combat social isolation. Using public transport empowers disabled people, allowing them to develop self-confidence and skills.

The previous Labour Government made huge strides forward in improving public transport, including by making it more accessible for disabled people. However, there is clearly more to do. As we have heard today, disabled people still cannot access the services that many of us take for granted, but during the 13 years of Labour government the UK saw spending on rail that was almost two and a half times higher than we inherited. The creation of Network Rail brought significant modernisation of lines and stations, and a programme of replacing the ageing train fleet began, with 4,800 new accessible train carriages built since 1999.

Labour also significantly increased the support for local transport services, with investment more than doubling on our watch, including improvements here in London to buses and the tube, as we have already heard. Local bus services saw investment rise by almost 300%, and across the country bus fleets were modernised, often incorporating features to make them more accessible.

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998 and the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 2000 made a number of changes to make using public transport easier and safer for disabled people. The majority of buses now have handrails and wheelchair spaces. All new tram and train carriages must be accessible, and there is a requirement for audio-visual systems—vital improvements for disabled people, but benefiting everyone else, too.

Parents with pushchairs find it easier to get on a bus because it has a low floor and a space for the pram. They no longer have to struggle to fold a buggy while holding a toddler and bags of shopping; I speak from experience. Visitors feel more confident in using the train and tram because there is a display showing where they are and what the final destination is. I cannot resist an example from my own city. It is reassuring to hear Wendy Smith, the voice of Nottingham's tram, tell someone what the next stop is when it is dark outside or pouring with rain, or when the tram is crowded.

In 2005, the Department for Transport began trials of on-board audio and visual passenger information systems, with a view to amending the 2000 regulations to make such equipment mandatory if the trials prove successful. We need to ensure that that research progresses, and I ask the Minister to set out clearly what his Department is doing to extend such provision across the bus network. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan said, under the 1998 regulations, all trams and trains must be fully accessible by 1 January 2020. What is the Department doing to ensure that train companies meet that deadline?

Unfortunately, the progress achieved under Labour is now under threat as a result of this Government's reckless deficit reduction plans. We recognise that transport spending needs to be reduced, even though that means making difficult and unpopular decisions, but the Government are going too far and too fast, with serious consequences. Funding for local transport will be reduced by 26% by 2015—over a quarter of the budget gone. With ring-fencing removed and local authorities under pressure, transport spending could even be lower. Worryingly, the *Financial Times* reported today that Campaign for Better Transport has uncovered the fact that English regions have already lost more than 1,000 bus services—over a fifth of all those supported by local authority funding. Funding for the concessionary fare scheme has already been cut by £223 million, and the bus service operators' grant will be cut by £254 million by 2013.

Overall, the Government are taking away half a billion pounds from local transport funding, causing unaffordable fare rises and the closure of routes, which will hit everyone in our communities. Disabled people, who are often on low incomes and especially reliant on public transport, will be hit even harder. The scheme that provides half-price coach travel will be wiped out a stroke at the end of this month, putting long-distance travel out of reach for many pensioners and disabled people, and threatening some routes.

In many areas, school transport, which is particularly important for disabled children and young people, is being cut or removed, hitting family budgets and excluding disabled youngsters from after-school activities such as sports, drama and music. That comes on top of the removal of education maintenance allowance and a threefold hike in tuition fees. No wonder so many young people feel that they are being priced out of opportunity.

Quite rightly, many hon. Members have focused on the need for physical changes to public transport vehicles to make them more accessible to disabled people, but such changes will simply be irrelevant if the services that people need are not running, or if disabled people cannot afford to travel on them. Families up and down the country, including those of the disabled, face a

[Lilian Greenwood]

cost-of-living crisis. Household bills are going up as a result of rising prices, wages are stagnant for those in work and many people face unemployment, including nearly 1 million young people, as today's figures show. They have to rely on benefits, which are not keeping pace with inflation. How on earth will they cope with the 28% increase in rail fares planned for the next three years?

Disabled people face the additional worry that scrapping disability living allowance and replacing it with the personal independence payment might mean that they lose the help that they have been receiving with the extra costs of mobility. That fear is particularly acute for disabled people in residential care, including young people living in residential schools and colleges. As it stands, the Welfare Reform Bill will remove the mobility component of PIP from those young people, even though there is no evidence of the double funding that the Government claim. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about their internal review of those proposals? Will he update us on their progress?

Disabled people already face barriers to their inclusion and participation in society. The Government should be on their side, breaking down those barriers, not building them even higher. How will the Minister do that? What assessment has his Department made of the impact on disabled people's access to public transport, particularly that of young disabled people, of his 26% local transport funding cut? Will his Government's decision to increase rail fares by 3% above inflation for the next three years have a disproportionate impact on disabled people? If so, how will he militate against it? Has he assessed how the loss of ticket-office staff will affect disabled passengers and what are his conclusions?

As the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee goes up in smoke as part of the bonfire of the quangos, how will the Minister ensure that disabled people, including young disabled people, are properly consulted on decisions that can have a profound impact on their lives? As we have heard today, disabled access to public transport is an issue in constituencies across the country. He needs to explain why disabled people are being asked to bear the brunt of his Department's spending cuts.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Penning): As always, it is a pleasure and honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. May I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), not only for the work that she has done today, but for her career at the Children's Society and Centrepoint? She has been a stalwart of the disability lobby for many years, and I am sure that she will be here for many years to come.

It was a pleasure listening to the debate. It is a shame that some colleagues have not stayed. There is a problem with this Chamber sometimes; people say their bit and then disappear, which I think is wrong, no matter which side of the House they are from. The debate was going well until the brand new shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), stood up. I welcome her to her post. Perhaps in future she will listen to the debate a little bit more, rather than read a prepared speech, which was a party political rant. The issue is not party political, and we had agreed before the debate started that the previous Government had done brilliantly when they were in power. Previous Governments have tried hard. We were left with a difficult economic situation. One of reasons why the previous Government had not done more was that it was difficult and expensive to do so. If we all admitted that, we would get a proper debate in the future.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Wigan. I am not the Minister responsible for the portfolio; I do roads and shipping. The Minister responsible is away on other ministerial business, and in my response I will not be able to answer directly many questions that have been raised by hon. Members today. Each individual will be written to by the Minister responsible and the officials.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the Minister for stepping in at short notice to cover his colleague's brief. Will he take a request back to his colleague to meet me and a small number of representatives from some of the campaigns that I have mentioned to put to his colleague directly some of our concerns and proposals? I am concerned that the issue could get lost as part of a wider Government agenda.

Mike Penning: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. One of the things in the many notes that were being passed back and forth here was that that would take place and that I would put my colleague on the spot, because the hon. Lady asked for a working group. Yes, we will have a working group while other proposals go forward. That is certainly important.

In my constituency—we are all constituency MPs at heart—I have raised such issues to my own station, where the lift is out of operation. The station is managed by London Midland. I have had detailed and quite strong conversations before I became a Minister, and certainly since.

There is often no sense as to why certain things happen. A profoundly deaf and blind constituent of mine had long been campaigning for a suitable bus for a disabled person to stop in my town centre, and it is there and has happened, which is great. However, the stop is next to a river and the railings have been taken down. Probably no one would believe that, but imagine someone who is blind, like my constituent, getting off the bus where the railings have been taken away and there is a river. Although it is not deep, we know what the problems would be. What was the logic of that? Where were the brain cells when that decision was made? Who knows what engineer decided to do that, but, as a constituency MP, I shall find out.

The points that have been raised today cross a spectrum of disabilities. Very often we talk about those who are wheelchair bound. The problem is that there are a plethora of different types of wheelchair. A lovely young man called Jack asked if he could do his work experience with me in the House of Commons—this story relates to what the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said about the state of the Palace and its lack of accessibility. I said yes to the work experience and a risk assessment and an access assessment were carried out. The answer was then no, because they could not accommodate the size of Jack's wheelchair. Well, in the end we did. It was a long-drawn-out route around the Palace, as I was in Norman Shaw at the time, but we did it. So often, we are told why we cannot do something instead of how we can do something.

Jack and one of my closest friends who sustained some of the worst injuries in the London bombings and survived spoke to me about the matter. They said, "Don't keep wrapping us up in cotton wool. We'll tell you how we can do things. We'll tell you how we can get there, rather than you telling us." That is why working groups and the different lobby groups are so important.

Interestingly, when it comes to access into buildings, I was told that we should ask disabled people how much access they need because we are paying through the nose—Jack's words not mine—for the works. A whole industry has grown up around access into buildings for disabled people. Actually, the whole matter could be dealt with much more simply and easily.

Why on earth would they want to put the toilets two floors up in Cambridge? I know exactly where the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert) is talking about because my daughter is studying at the Anglia Ruskin college in Cambridge and has a Saturday job in the place mentioned. The question that we must ask, as constituency MPs and Ministers, is why. Tell me the reason why that has happened and why we are in that position? As I mentioned earlier, I will pass on any question that I cannot answer this afternoon to my colleague who will then respond in writing.

All front-line rail staff are supposed to be trained, but will it make any difference if they do not have the will, inclination or empathy to help? One thing that we can all do is to say to young people, "Let us be your voice." That is what we are here for. They do not want to fill in survey forms; they have had enough of that. I say, "Just give us a little whisper and tell us on what train or on what bus a member of staff was rude to you or did not do what they should have done." It is amazing, colleagues, what a letter or a size 10 boot from an MP can do to energise employers to look at what their staff are doing.

Dr Huppert: When the Minister argues that we should offer to be the voice of some of these people, I assume that he would also support the various parliament-type organisations that enable disabled people to be their own voices and to represent themselves much more strongly.

Mike Penning: Such organisations do a fantastic job, but we need to ensure that there is access to this place. The all-party parliamentary groups, of which my hon. Friend is a member—I was chairman of several all party groups when I was a Back Bencher—are about access. They are not just talking shops. They are there to say that people have the right to come forward.

It is a requirement of rail employers to ensure that their front-line staff have the right sort of training.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Minister for giving way; he has been generous with his time. I am interested in his point about writing letters. If I forward a letter to him from Disability Action in Islington concerning the cancellation of the step-free access programme to the London underground, I am sure that he will be straight on the phone to Boris Johnson who will make sure that these programmes are reinstated. Have I got a deal there? Is that okay?

Mike Penning: I will do a deal with the hon. Gentleman. If he writes to me, I will pass on his letter to the Minister responsible who will then be in contact with Boris. I am trying to think of the station that has had the lift installed.

Jeremy Corbyn: Green Park.

Mike Penning: That is right. The lift cost £25 million. One issue that has been raised is the age of our network. I do not know whether that applies to our buses. Actually, the situation in London has dramatically improved because all buses have disabled access now. Although we have more modern trains, our stations and platforms are a massive issue for all constituency MPs.

Jack Dromey: I thank the Minister for his constructive response to the proposal of my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan for a wider discussion to take place and the establishment of a working group. That is welcome indeed. May I just ask him about the specific issue of the changes being proposed by London Midland? Given that the proposals are now on the Secretary of State's desk, will he facilitate a meeting with the RNIB, Mencap and the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign because it is important that their voices are heard before a final decision is made?

Mike Penning: The point that I was going to get to is the urgency of some issues, including the one that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned. It is the Minister of State who is responsible for that issue. I will put a note on her desk tomorrow asking if that meeting can take place. I am not responsible any further than that, but I will do what I say and anyone who knows me will say that that is the case.

I thank the hon. Member for Wigan, who is relatively new in the House, for giving the Minister a list of the questions that she wants answered; it is ever so helpful. Notes are flying back and forth and I must have 20 notes sitting on my desk here. Clearly, I will not be able to answer all of them in the four minutes that I have left and I am not going to try. I do not wish to have a pop at the hon. Member for Nottingham South. I remember sitting in the same seat as a shadow Health Minister for almost exactly the same amount of time that she has been in the House. It is an honour and a privilege to be in this place whether in government or in opposition. Sometimes it may seem difficult, especially when one thinks of the huge number of civil servants backing the Minister and writing his speeches for him. However, I must say that I have not read the speech that they wrote for me. Well, I read it last night and did not like it. They will get used to me; I am just that way.

Let me stress again that all the points that have been raised are about tone and about people's rights. I know that we are not allowed to indicate who is in the Public Gallery in Westminster Hall, but we are privileged that people have come here, sometimes in very difficult circumstances, to express their rights and to say, "Why am I getting a bum deal compared with other people?"—I do not know how *Hansard* will work that one out, but

[Mike Penning]

there we are. The situation is fundamentally wrong, but it is not easy to resolve. I hate the word "targets" but we have targets for 2020, which the companies will have to meet. In the hon. Member for Wigan's constituency, there will be a franchise change in 2013. I am conscious of her question, and the Minister responsible will respond to it. I also need to know what rail operator she refers to. Perhaps she can write to me and let me know. We got rid of guards vans in 2004. If that was a comment, it might have been sarcastic, but it was also manifestly incorrect. There are no guards vans to travel in.

The rail companies operate a taxi service—I do not like it because it is a cop-out for them—and the people to whom the hon. Lady referred should have been offered a taxi for the short distance that we are talking about. Instead of one person waiting to be shuttled to their destination, which is an appalling situation to be in, common sense should have prevailed and a taxi should have been ordered to take all four people to their destination. If the hon. Lady can write to me and tell me the name of the company, it would help. People are out there checking up on these companies. It is a huge rail and bus network, but there are people out there checking out what is going on and whether promises, commitments and franchise agreements are being met.

Instead of being typically British and just putting up with things because that is the way we are, we should perhaps be more like the German transport people whom I met earlier today. They would not put up with this because they have a completely different attitude. They expect a service and they tell people in no uncertain terms where they should be. Let us speak up on behalf of our constituents. Constituents need to complain to their MPs and their MPs should tell us. If that happens, perhaps we can have a service for the 21st century that everyone deserves.

Violence against Women and Girls

4 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Thank you very much, Mr Robertson, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Although I am delighted to have secured this debate on the prevention of violence against women and girls, I wish that it was unnecessary. However, the facts and figures on gendered violence remain so alarming that it is clear that, as a society, we are still failing to approach the problem with anything like the urgency or seriousness that it deserves. Currently, two women a week are killed by a partner or ex-partner and every year 60,000 women are raped. Sexual harassment in schools, communities and workplaces is routine, and an estimated 6,500 girls in the UK are at risk of female genital mutilation.

According to the British crime survey, in Brighton and Hove—where my Brighton, Pavilion constituency is located—around 25,000 women are likely to experience repeat domestic violence as adults. Last year, 277 women sought housing advice and 102 homeless applications were made—*[Interruption.]*

John Robertson (in the Chair): Order. Could we have silence at the back, please? Thank you.

Caroline Lucas: As I was saying, 102 homeless applications were made due to domestic violence. Nearly 11,000 women experience physical and emotional violence; more than 2,700 women experience sexual assault; and more than 6,600 women were the focus of stalking. Those are big figures, but behind each number is a real life that has been hugely damaged by this experience. Moreover, 44% of the 264 young people assessed by the youth offending service in Brighton and Hove in 2009 had been abused—that is nearly half—and 42% had experienced domestic violence at home.

I therefore welcome the fact that, in its call to end violence against women and girls, the Home Office has recognised the need for a targeted approach to tackle the ongoing scandal of violence against and abuse of women and girls. The Government's strategy purports to put prevention at its heart, yet I fear that that objective risks being undermined by a lack of joined-up thinking and the policies of other Government Departments.

Furthermore, as the domestic violence team at Brighton and Hove city council has told me, in the Government's strategy, there is no allocated funding for prevention of and early intervention for violence against women. All the money is still being allocated to crisis work, with only limited attention being given to addressing the cause of the problem—in other words, perpetrators' behaviour. In Brighton and Hove, since 2004, the city has been working specifically with perpetrators to address their abuse and I am proud that it was the first programme to be accredited nationally by Respect. The local authority has committed to maintaining the programme, but due to demand it is not able to accommodate all the referrals. It finds it very difficult to turn away people who want to join the programme, because it is so concerned about the risks that people face if help is not available.

That work needs to be properly funded. It should not be made dependent on sympathetic council administrations, or put at risk because of central Government spending cuts. Brighton and Hove, whose intelligent commissioning on domestic violence is recognised as good practice, has a local commitment to developing a strategy on violence against women and girls, with work already under way to deliver that strategy. However, not many local areas have the same kind of co-ordinated approach and I want the Government to consider making it an obligation that all local authorities must fulfil.

As well as the historical focus on tackling the aftermath of violence, such as bringing perpetrators to court, we must ensure that preventing violence in the first place is much more of a priority across Government. Let us take, for example, work with young people in schools. The importance of that work is underlined by the findings of an NSPCC study, which revealed that almost half—43%—of teenage girls believe that it is acceptable for a boyfriend to be aggressive towards a female partner. One in two boys and one in three girls believe that there are some circumstances in which it is okay to hit a woman or force her to have sex.

Young people in Britain not only have an alarmingly tolerant attitude to violence against women but many of them are exposed daily to the results of our failure to confront such attitudes head-on. For example, a YouGov poll for the End Violence Against Women Coalition found that a third of girls are subjected to unwanted sexual contact at school, with sexual harassment being routine. In addition, the NSPCC found that 33% of girls between 13 and 17 who are in an intimate partner relationship have experienced some sort of sexual partner violence. Although there has been an increased focus on other forms of bullying, many schools fail to recognise that unwanted sexual contact, sexual harassment and sexual name-calling are also specific forms of abuse that girls suffer routinely.

Girls from ethnic minority backgrounds may face additional risks. The Home Affairs Committee recently reported that schools are failing to respond to girls who are at risk of forced marriage and may even be putting female students in greater danger. We will wait and see whether forcing someone into a marriage becomes an offence in its own right, as the Prime Minister has indicated that it should be. I hope very much that he will introduce legislation on that issue.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): The hon. Lady made an important point about early intervention and prevention, particularly in relation to girls. Does she agree that we must do a lot more in schools and that we must talk to our girls about self-empowerment, self-esteem, gender equality and empowerment? Does she agree that we need to do much more in those areas?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, not least because I know that she has a great deal of expertise in this area, and of course I absolutely agree with what she says. It is also interesting that young women themselves tell us that they want things to change. Around 52% of young women who were polled said that ending domestic violence against women and children is the issue that they care most about. That is according to research carried out by Girlguiding UK in conjunction with the Fawcett Society, the British Youth Council and Populus.

All over the UK, women's organisations are doing innovative work with these young people, often with only minimal resources. For example, Rise, a charity based in Brighton and Hove, delivers a personal, social, health and economic preventive education programme on healthy relationships to schools across the city. It is also currently working to integrate the Women's Aid "Expect Respect" programme into work that is currently taking place in primary schools. Rise also delivers "Break for Change", a groundbreaking group for young people who are aggressive in their relationships. That group is for the young people's carers, too. The Home Office itself is currently running a campaign called, "This is abuse", which is aimed at tackling teenage relationship abuse.

However, work to prevent violence against women and girls cannot be left to occasional campaigns or women's organisations working in partnership with good schools where they can. It must be an absolutely integral part of education and policy that is delivered in every single school.

Unfortunately, it appears that the Department for Education is dragging its feet on this issue. The commitment to teaching sexual consent in personal, social and health education is welcome, but it needs to go much further and include all forms of violence against women, including teenage relationship abuse, forced marriage, FGM and sexual exploitation. It should also be linked to work on gender equality and work that challenges gender stereotypes.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): I just wanted to draw on some of the experience that I have gained from the Education Committee. As I understand it, only three hours of teacher training time is dedicated to behaviour and discipline in schools throughout a two or three-year degree course. There is very little hope that we can even start to explore the issues affecting young women who face violence and give them any sort of strategy if the teachers have absolutely no awareness of behaviour and behaviour training. There needs to be a concerted effort from the Minister's Department to work with the DFE to deal with that problem.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I did not know that particular piece of information and it makes me even more alarmed than I was when I first stood up to speak. It shows that this is part of a much bigger issue, which is about ensuring that our teachers are properly equipped to pass on that vital training.

It is interesting that Education Ministers have signalled that they want these issues to remain outside the statutory curriculum, running the risk that many young women and men will never be exposed to education designed to reduce gendered violence. Cuts to specialist local-level posts, such as domestic violence co-ordinators and teenage pregnancy co-ordinators, risk exacerbating the problem even further.

In its report, "A Different World is Possible", the End Violence Against Women Coalition recommends a "whole school approach", with heads taking a lead, teachers been trained on the issues and all students receiving comprehensive sex and relationships education on consent, equality and respect. That is already a top priority in Brighton and Hove—it builds on work by a number of the agencies that I mentioned earlier. The local authority's strategy states:

[Caroline Lucas]

> "Evidence shows that to be effective in domestic violence prevention work, addressing the issue in PSHE and SRE lessons or in assemblies has limited impact and value, if the messages promoted are not supported by other initiatives and the broader ethos of the school."

I therefore ask the Minister to call on her colleagues at the Department for Education to clearly identify one single Education Minister to lead on preventing violence against women and girls. I also ask her to tell us what contribution she has made to the Department for Education's internal review on PSHE, and whether she has argued the case for sexual consent and all forms of violence against women to be a compulsory part of the curriculum.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister hosted a summit on tackling the commercialisation and sexualisation of children and announced a range of policies, many of which I warmly welcome. However, amid the messages about consumer and parent power, there was an element missing: empowering young people themselves to be media literate and to cope with the bombardment of often inappropriate images. Although I recognise that the measures announced will go some way towards cutting down on the images that young people are exposed to—outside schools, for example—we can safely say that this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Like any parent, I absolutely understand the desire to protect our children, and one of the best ways of doing so is through specific education that allows young people to be more in control of their sexualisation, rather than being dictated to by the media or by advertising. There is no plan as yet, however, specifically to address that in schools.

Earlier, I noted that central Government cuts might undermine efforts being made to tackle violence against women and girls, and I am particularly concerned about cuts to legal aid. Informing women of their legal rights and giving them access to legal representation is one way of empowering them and of trying to protect them against violence. It can give them the information they need to stand up to their abuser. There are serious risk implications, therefore, for women who cannot access legal aid. By reducing women's ability to access legal aid, the Ministry of Justice risks damaging work at the Home Office on preventing violence against women and girls, and I would love to know whether the Minister shares my concerns about that.

I also wonder whether the Minister is dismayed by the Home Secretary's proposal to change the eligibility requirements under paragraph 289A—the domestic violence rule—of the immigration rules. That would mean that all applicants under the domestic rule must be free of unspent criminal convictions. That actively undermines the Government's commitment to eliminate violence against women. Will the Minister contribute to the UK Border Agency consultation, and remind the Home Secretary about the coalition Government's obligations and commitment to protect all women from domestic violence?

The Equality Trust points out that 24% of women in Britain are worried about rape and that all kinds of violence are more common in more unequal societies. It stands to reason that preventing violence against women and girls is closely linked to tackling inequality and other social injustices. As just one example of what happens if we fail to do that, Frances Crook, chief executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, tells me that more than a third of girls in the youth justice system have experienced abuse and a quarter have witnessed violence at home. Of the more than 4,000 women currently serving a prison sentence, more than half report having suffered domestic violence and one in three have experienced sexual abuse. For the vast majority of those very vulnerable women, prison is not the answer, and that is why both I and the Howard League for Penal Reform support community solutions for non-violent women offenders. I am keen, therefore, to see the Government's target interventions to ensure the prevention of violence against women and girls address intersections of gender with other social inequalities.

I stress that the Government's work on preventing violence against women and girls needs to encompass an international perspective. Here, too, we see evidence of a lack of leadership and concerns about co-ordination. There are now a number of very welcome Government strategies that reference international violence against women and girls, so oversight of all the different processes is vital and, for maximum impact, the different strategies and policies across Government should be coherent and mutually reinforcing.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Is it not important to bring the international communities into this—the women and girls of different nationalities with different cultural backgrounds? The Prime Minister will be attending a conference in a couple of weeks' time at which he should raise that point, so that we can get the international communities behind us.

Caroline Lucas: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's important intervention.

At the highest level, a member of the National Security Council should have explicit responsibility for women, peace and security, to ensure that gender perspectives are taken into account in all discussions. Despite some references in the "Building Stability Overseas Strategy" document and in the UK national action plan for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, violence against women and girls is still not fully recognised as either a foreign policy priority or a security matter. It is not recognised as both a cause and a consequence of conflict. When violent conflict occurs, violence against women and girls is not seen as a priority matter.

The UK Government must take a leadership role internationally, to ensure that preventing violence against women and girls stays on the international agenda. Globally, about one in three women or girls have been beaten or sexually abused in their lifetime, and 75% of the civilians killed in war are women and children, so I am keen to hear from the Minister what has been achieved, or what has changed in our approach to violence against women as a foreign policy issue, since she was appointed to the role of overseas champion about a year ago.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate and on her excellent and comprehensive speech. I agree that the international effort that we must be part of, and lead, is important, but it is vital that we lead by example. Yesterday in the Chamber, concern was expressed about the woefully low level of prosecutions for human trafficking, which affects many women and young girls, and about our country's reluctance to take the lead on issuing a guardianship programme that would help us to secure those prosecutions. Does she have any thoughts about that?

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Member is absolutely right to point to the guardianship programme as a concrete measure that we could take to show exactly that kind of international leadership. That would make a huge difference to some of the most vulnerable people coming into our communities. I very much support the proposal, and the work that she has been doing on it.

I was talking about the Minister's role as the overseas champion, and I wonder if she can tell us what her priorities for that role will be over the coming year. Can she confirm whether she has a budget with which to carry out her responsibilities?

I am mindful that I have asked the Minister a number of questions, so I will wind up now. Making our schools safer for girls, enabling young men to challenge their peers, changing attitudes that blame women for violence and ensuring that the equalities team's work is underscored by the policies of other Departments are all things that would make a genuine difference to the lives of women and girls here in Britain and around the world. The old adage that prevention is better than cure may well be familiar, but in this case it rings particularly true.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Lynne Featherstone): I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this debate. The matter is a most important and serious one, both in this country and internationally, and I want to assure the hon. Lady that despite the very difficult times we are in, the Government are absolutely committed to nothing less than ending all forms of violence against women and girls. I, too, wish that it was not necessary to have such debates, but the statistics in this country are truly terrible, and across the world they are far worse. The issue is sometimes hidden, so there is a fear and a danger that it will be marginalised when priorities compete. However, as the first page of the action plan says,

> "VAWG services should not be the easy cut"

for local councils.

I do not know how much more loud or clear we in central Government could have made our message. Even in this climate, we are ring-fencing £28 million for VAWG services and £10 million from the Ministry of Justice for rape crisis support centres. We are funding independent domestic violence adviser posts, including one in the hon. Lady's home patch in Brighton and Hove. We are also funding Rise. Where we can provide funding, we are, although circumstances are difficult. We have done so expressly to send the message that violence against women is a priority and should not be vulnerable to cuts from local authorities, although we know that that is happening. Local areas are best placed to make local decisions, but we have tried and are trying to say to councils—I hope that they read today's *Hansard*—"Do not cut these vital services."

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con) *rose—*

Tessa Munt *rose—*

Mr Virendra Sharma *rose—*

Lynne Featherstone: I will give way to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karl McCartney) and the hon. Member for Wells (Tessa Munt), but briefly, because I want to answer the questions asked by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion.

Karl McCartney: I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion on securing this debate and on how she delivered her speech. Is the Minister aware that of every three victims of partner abuse, two are female and one male? Is she concerned that successive Governments have placed all domestic abuse policy under an overarching violence against women and girls strategy? It means that men suffering domestic or sexual abuse are second-class victims. Effectively, it is an example of institutional sexism. Does she believe that domestic abuse must be—

John Robertson (in the Chair): Order. Generally, one question at a time.

Lynne Featherstone: I assure the hon. Gentleman that men are part of our strategy and funding. I will take a quick intervention from the hon. Member for Wells, but I want to answer the questions asked by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion.

Tessa Munt: The problem is particularly acute in rural areas where there are serious stresses. I am in contact with the Farm Crisis Network, which is aware that people in isolated situations also face domestic violence, and there is practically no possibility that they can get to a rape crisis centre, which might be 25 miles away. Does the Minister have any thoughts on that?

Lynne Featherstone: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point.

I agree with the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion that prevention, which is one of the four key planks of our strategy, is extremely important. I assure her that my Department and I will bring as much pressure to bear as possible in discussions for the Department for Education to get a shift on with its consultation on personal, social and health education, which just finished and will be published in November. We regard it as vital, although we do not necessarily regard it as vital that it be statutory. We await the results of the consultation. I agree that young people's attitudes and behaviour are vital, and that teachers need training in order to intervene successfully.

Mr Virendra Sharma *rose—*

Lynne Featherstone: I am not taking any more interventions.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion mentioned the teenage relationship abuse campaign. It is one area on which we are spending money. The NSPCC research that she discussed is shocking. The abuse that teenagers seem to accept as normal—they think that it is okay to be treated like that—is the most frightening aspect. I do

[Lynne Featherstone]

not know whether she has seen the films from the abuse campaign, but they are incredibly powerful and successful. The site has received more than 75,000 visits. It is not just about the film and the campaign; the purpose is to signpost young people towards help.

Mr Sharma: Will the Minister give way?

Lynne Featherstone: I will not. I am keen to answer the hon. Lady's points, as it is her debate.

The hon. Lady asked me about my role of international champion in tackling violence against women and girls. The other half of that is policy coherence across Whitehall; it is in the job title. I assure her that when I came into the post in December, the first thing that I did was engage across Whitehall. Clearly, I will not be effective on my own in tackling worldwide violence against women and girls, unless I find a multiplier for the work that I am doing. I have done so, and have developed numerous messages on women and on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. Travelling Ministers have agreed to take those messages to international meetings and raise them wherever they go. The issue at the moment is finding out who is going where and when, but it is an important step. I reassure the hon. Lady that I have nothing but support from the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development. They are absolutely committed to the human rights agenda, and I argue that equal rights are human rights.

Caroline Lucas: While we are on the role of the overseas champion, will the Minister clarify whether she has a budget for any part of that work?

Lynne Featherstone: I do, and a little bit of help, although not as much as I would like. I have been to India and Nepal. I am working at three levels on such trips. I cannot go gallivanting across the world; I have a limited budget, and it is a matter of where I can get maximum traction on the issue. For example, in India, I met with the India Women's Press Corps, which carried messages about gender-based violence across India and into every publication. I am trying to maximise bang for buck. I am meeting at the ministerial and permanent secretary level as well as in civil society. I am also visiting projects involving women in rural villages. I am going to Brussels on Tuesday to carry some of those issues forward, including LGBT issues. My eyes are on Afghanistan at the moment, as well as on the Arab spring, which I want to be a feminist summer, as I am sure the hon. Lady does.

The hon. Lady asked about immigration changes. No one with a minor conviction has been or will ever be denied their stay in this country, but neither do the Government think that it is right for different rules to apply if there is a conviction. On legal aid, we are keeping legal aid for victims in private family law cases where domestic violence is a feature, and we have not sought to change the accepted definition of domestic violence. We are including all forms of domestic violence, physical and mental, in legal aid criteria.

The hon. Lady mentioned forced marriage, which has been in the news recently. The Prime Minister has made it a priority, and we will consult on whether it should become a criminal offence in its own right. I am keen that we take evidence, for example from the women involved in the 257 forced marriage protection orders taken out under civil orders. We should ask those women whether they would have come forward had forced marriage been a criminal offence. In my view, the only reason not to make it an offence is that doing so might prohibit people from coming forward, which would undermine the benefits of sending a message that it is serious enough to be criminal.

I cite the issue of female genital mutilation, which is a criminal offence. The Opposition ask me every time we have oral questions whether there have been any prosecutions. There have not, either under the Labour Government or during the year and a half that we have been in government, because it is difficult to get evidence and make people come forward. I am keen that whatever we do should promote the best result in dealing with forced marriage. We know that there is great pressure, and the law may well change. The Prime Minister has announced that we will criminalise breaches of civil orders in the interim while we consult on the matter. However, I am not keen on messages; I am keen on getting it right. That is more important.

We as a Government have moved forward proactively. We have introduced domestic homicide reviews and pilots on domestic violence protection orders. If they prove successful, we will roll them out. We have extended the Sojourner project and will find a long-term solution. We are fast-tracking asylum applications for those in refuges who, due to their asylum status, have no recourse to public funds. I hope that hon. Members agree that we are on the right path to making society a better and safer place where women and girls do not have to live in fear of violence or lack support when they need it. These are tough times, but we are doing our very best.

Commonwealth Partners (Resources and Co-operation)

4.30 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. The subject of this debate is sharing resources and co-operation with Commonwealth partners, which I feel passionate about. I do not think that, in recent years, this country has necessarily put the sort of emphasis that we should have on our relationship with our Commonwealth partners, so I would like a response from the Minister.

It is important to recognise what the Commonwealth is and the important role that it plays around the world, especially in our own country. It is made up of 54 sovereign nations and contains 31% of the global population—about 2 billion people—more than half of whom are 25 or under, so the Commonwealth and its population really are the future. It contains the world's largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries, and its members span six continents and oceans, from Africa, Asia, the Americas and, of course, Europe. There are 44 Commonwealth countries in the G77, which will be an increasingly important body, and five in the G20—Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and the United Kingdom. Nineteen of the 39 African Union members are from the Commonwealth. Similarly, 10 nations in the Pacific Islands Forum are Commonwealth nations. Indeed, even two countries in the European Union—Malta and ourselves—are members of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is also a massive trade body, with $3 trillion of trade taking place within it each year. We hear a lot about our trading relationship within Europe, but considering the fact that the Commonwealth includes economies such as India's, it is clear that the possibilities for trade growth within the Commonwealth are massive.

Commonwealth countries comprise a third of the destinations for our exports. When both trading partners are Commonwealth members, the value of trade is likely to be a third to half more than when one or both are non-Commonwealth. Indeed, five of the top 10 countries in which to do business are Commonwealth countries. As a body, the Commonwealth might be rooted in history, but its best potential lies in the future.

Don McKinnon, a former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, has said:

> "One of the standard misconceptions about the Commonwealth is that it is merely a 'relic of the Empire'... The truth is that the Commonwealth is a unique organization, which provides an international forum where each member country can have its voice heard and increase its weight in world affairs. It is a family of nations, whose members share not only a common identity, but common values and a common sense of purpose."

I would argue that it also shares a common future.

The Commonwealth has shifting focuses—from foreign affairs, particularly the promotion of democracy and human rights, to science and technology, and the role of women, which has been its focus this year—and it plays a vital role in education. I know from my former profession as a teacher that Commonwealth teachers and students are involved in strong education programmes and links. It is to be regretted, however, that Commonwealth citizens who come to this country are forced to pay fees to study in UK universities that European Union citizens do not.

We get all that from the Commonwealth for just 20p per citizen a year, as opposed to the £54 a year it costs us to be a member of the European Union. I promise to move on from the EU, but there has been a perception in recent years—this was certainly the perception in many of our Commonwealth partner nations—that when we joined the EU, we in some ways turned our back on the Commonwealth. I pay tribute to the Government, particularly the Foreign Secretary, who in recent months has made it clear that the Commonwealth is very much a part, and an increasingly important one, of our foreign policy as we progress. That should not be viewed as an EU-versus-Commonwealth argument, but it is clear that, when we entered the EU, there was a perception that in some way we left behind the Commonwealth. I have my own view on the EU, but we need not get into that today.

The Commonwealth has a huge role to play in aid and development overseas. Although that is not strictly part of the Minister's portfolio, it is important that we refresh ourselves with some of the relevant statistics. India provides about £7 million a year to 19 African members. Indeed, Australia has recently increased its commitment to Commonwealth countries in Africa, which is something to which the UK Government are also committed.

I mentioned trade briefly in my introductory remarks. The Commonwealth is an incredibly important player in trade internationally. It is important that we as a Government demonstrate that, while our trading relationship with the EU is important, there are huge opportunities available to us in the Commonwealth, which is, in itself, collectively responsible for more than 20% of world trade, about 20% of investment, and approximately 20% of the world's gross domestic product. Between them, Commonwealth nations imported some $2.3 trillion-worth of goods and exported $2.1 trillion-worth in 2008 alone. We should promote intra-Commonwealth trade and ensure that the Commonwealth plays a key role in new international markets, particularly considering the emergence of economies in Asia, Africa and Latin America. India will be an economic and democratic powerhouse. It is in the Commonwealth, so we have links and relationships, and could be making so much more of them.

Turning to the Minister's responsibilities, the greatest potential for growth might lie in foreign policy and the Commonwealth's soft power. I hope to hear from him what the UK's vision is for the Commonwealth and any common foreign policy aims. I suppose that the advantage of a common foreign policy agenda in the Commonwealth is that that does not come through diktat, as might be true of other organisations. It is about coming together and sharing broad aims and principles, and working towards them. Moreover, there is no infringement on any nation's sovereignty.

I and many others have said that the Commonwealth embodies the diversity of race, ethnicity, religion, political institutions and liberalism that characterises the reality of globalisation. Opportunities are available. By working together, we could have a major impact on international affairs and developmental issues in particular, which is something to which the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting reaffirmed its commitment.

I want to press the Minister on the Government's vision for the future of the Commonwealth. I have mentioned sharing resources. Discussions have taken

[Andrew Percy]

place between other Commonwealth countries—perhaps we have been involved in some of them—about this country's massive network of overseas missions and foreign embassies. The UK alone has, I think, more than 300 foreign missions. Canada, which is a country with which I am acquainted, has more than 260. That massive international Commonwealth network offers us huge potential, particularly at a time of fiscal restraint, when we are making tough decisions about our overseas missions. In this country, we do not necessarily always get the sense of the importance of the Commonwealth that we get when we visit other Commonwealth countries. A Canadian passport states, as clear as day, that if the passport holder needs help overseas they should head to a Canadian embassy or, if none exists, to a British embassy. There is the potential for us to share some of our resources for foreign missions with like-minded nations that are also making tough fiscal decisions.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and near geographical neighbour on the subject of his debate. He has touched on a few Commonwealth issues that have chimed with me. For example, he just mentioned passports. Through my role with the Sir Keith Park memorial campaign, I am aware that many people from New Zealand, South Africa and other countries that are part of the Commonwealth and that helped us during the second world war—such countries feel an affinity to our nation—think that the changes made to visa rules in recent years under the previous Labour Government have not treated them very well. Obviously, I hope he agrees that it is time to put back what they have given us over the years and to treat them in the way that fellow Commonwealth members should be treated.

Andrew Percy: I thank my hon. Friend and next-door-but-one or two neighbour—anyway, he is a fellow Lincolnshire Member—for that intervention.

When I return to the United Kingdom, I am offended that people are pushed along through the European Union channel. Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Germans and French people are able to walk through those channels, but our own brethren from Canada, Australia and other Commonwealth countries are made to feel very much like foreigners. Of course, Commonwealth citizens are not foreigners when they come to this country, nor are we foreigners when we visit Commonwealth countries. That is not something I was going to raise with the Minister, but it is a good point that I hope will be heard by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and as my hon. Friend says, it is about time that we treated those fellow Commonwealth citizens with dignity and respect. We should at least put them on an equal footing with other citizens.

Jessica Lee (Erewash) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. We have mentioned the point about passport control. Is it not also right that, with the Queen's forthcoming diamond jubilee, this is the perfect opportunity for us to reassert our relationship with Commonwealth countries, particularly in terms of economic resources and co-operation?

Andrew Percy: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The diamond jubilee next year is an absolutely fantastic opportunity for us to show that.

The Commonwealth is rooted in history, but it is also about the future. Let us consider the statistics on the percentage of the world's population, particularly young people, and on international trade, investment and where those emerging markets are. Let us park what is happening in the eurozone and the collapse of European economies and look to where the future is. The future is in those markets and in those regions of the world where the Commonwealth has links, both historical and actual, that no other organisation or international body has, with the possible exception of the United Nations, although that is variable. There is a chance for the Government to restate their absolute commitment to the Commonwealth.

In the two or three minutes remaining, I shall put my questions to the Minister. I apologise for not being able to send him my questions in advance, but I ended up putting this information together at a late stage because of various clashes. What is the Government's vision for the Commonwealth? What progress has been made on the Foreign Secretary's 2010 statement that the FCO would

> "lead a co-ordinated cross Whitehall approach to help the Commonwealth achieve its potential and which underlines the United Kingdom's commitment to this unique global organisation"?

I would like to get a sense from the Government of what areas of policy co-operation they feel could best help to promote the values of the Commonwealth and those elements of economic development and trade that are so important. Given the fiscal pressures on the United Kingdom and other countries, has the FCO yet considered sharing foreign missions and other resources internationally with our Commonwealth partners? The research paper "UK Defence and Security Policy: A New Approach?", published in January, contains the following Government quote:

> "We want to strengthen the Commonwealth as a focus for promoting democratic values and development".

We would all agree with that and I hope to hear the Minister's view on achieving it.

As my hon. Friends said in their interventions, there is the potential for the Commonwealth to move forward and be one of the most important bodies internationally during the next few decades, particularly given the development taking place there. While bearing in mind the United Kingdom's relationship with Europe, its transatlantic relationships and so on, we need to ensure that at the heart of policy making is a commitment to working to improve and further develop Commonwealth relationships. The previous Government did not seem to pay much attention to the Commonwealth—the fact that no Opposition Members are here perhaps suggests that that is still the case—but this Government think differently. I hope that the Minister will take on board some of my points. I look forward to his response.

4.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Henry Bellingham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) on securing the opportunity to discuss this issue and pay tribute to him for his excellent speech. I will do my best to answer the questions that he posed. I am also grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Jessica Lee) and for Lincoln (Karl McCartney) for their interventions. The debate has shown that there is a great deal of support and interest in the Commonwealth in Parliament.

It is important to note that enduring historical links form the basis of the strong bonds that join Commonwealth countries together and that, even though those historical links have roots in the 19th century, they form one of the platforms that is most suited to the world of the 21st century. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole pointed out, the UK has upgraded its relationship with the Commonwealth substantially. Under this Government, we now have a Minister for the Commonwealth, who has firmly put the "C" back into the FCO. I thank my hon. Friend for the praise that he gave to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary; he feels equally strongly about the matter.

We are working with member states to help the organisation to realise its full potential to become a stronger force for promoting democratic values, development and prosperity, and trade. Before I comment on the specific issues raised, let me put the Government's relations with the Commonwealth into context. We look to the Commonwealth as a key multilateral organisation, a ready-made network and an ideal platform for future co-operation in a rapidly changing global landscape. As the Prime Minister has said, Britain's active membership of the Commonwealth is at the heart of our foreign policy. It is in the UK's interests to be part of a strengthened Commonwealth, as it has a membership that includes many of the fastest growing and most technologically advanced economies in the world.

The Commonwealth already contributes significantly to international affairs, brokering agreements between African neighbours and calming tensions in fragile states during contested elections. It also provides a forum for smaller nations who may feel that their voices are lost in larger multilateral structures. I particularly point out the Commonwealth's role in providing election monitors. So far this year, it has done so in Nigeria, Zambia and, indeed, will do so in the forthcoming elections in Cameroon. Commonwealth observers have been very much part of different observer and monitoring teams in those countries. They are respected and are acceptable to host countries. The Commonwealth is made up not just of the Governments of its member states, but of a multitude of non-governmental and civil society organisations and networks, which contribute, as the secretary-general of the organisation said,

"to the great global good".

Turning to the issues discussed today, we enjoy a long history of mutual support among Commonwealth countries. On the consular side, which my hon. Friend mentioned, during the Libya crisis, in the space of a few days, the UK evacuated more than 800 UK nationals and more than 1,000 other nationals from more than 50 countries, many of which were Commonwealth countries.

During normal times, Commonwealth nationals in difficulty in non-Commonwealth countries where they do not have any diplomatic or consular representation of their own may turn to any other Commonwealth embassy for consular assistance. So where a Commonwealth national does not have representation in a non-Commonwealth country, our embassies may provide first response assistance. Once British consular staff have provided initial assistance by contacting someone who is detained or hospitalised, they will look to hand over responsibility to the individual's nearest embassy to provide support. With some countries, notably Australia, those informal arrangements bring significant benefits to British nationals, particularly in the Pacific region where Australia's diplomatic network is extensive.

When a country has been suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth, we may still be able to provide consular assistance to its citizens. That is particularly so if the suspension was not aimed at ordinary citizens of the country. I refer particularly to Zimbabwe, which left the Commonwealth before it was suspended, where our dispute was not with the country's citizens, but with the people running the country.

Let me make it clear that the UK can take no responsibility for other Commonwealth citizens in Commonwealth countries. In those circumstances, unrepresented Commonwealth citizens can turn to the host Commonwealth Government for assistance. We would expect the Commonwealth country concerned to make other arrangements if the host Government do not accept their responsibility towards unrepresented Commonwealth nationals.

On visas, under an unwritten convention agreed at a previous Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, UK visa issuing posts in non-Commonwealth countries issue visas on behalf of Commonwealth countries. That is obviously good news. The convention does not apply where a Commonwealth country either has a visa issuing mission established in that country, or has special arrangements. Commonwealth partners for whom the UK issues visas vary from post to post and that reflects demand. For example, India is one of the biggest beneficiaries of that service, with more than 100 UK posts issuing visas on its behalf.

I take on board what my hon. Friend said about immigration controls and ports of entry. In some ways, it irks all of us that we do not even have a UK channel coming into our own country; it is an EU channel. People have asked me whether it would be better to have a channel for citizens of countries where the Queen is head of state, which would include the overseas territories, the realms and a number of Commonwealth countries. That is not just in the hands of the Foreign Office, but my hon. Friend has made his point, and we will take it on board and look at it.

Our embassies and our representation abroad are very important. I will just correct my hon. Friend on one point. We have 192 missions around the world. I wish we did have the number that he gave. The Government have extended the network—in fact, we have opened new embassies; the previous Government closed embassies—in Africa in particular. We are reopening our embassy in Madagascar. We are reopening our embassy in Abidjan. We will reopen our embassy in Somalia as soon as the security situation allows, and we have opened a new embassy in Juba, in South Sudan, a country that has applied for membership of the Commonwealth. We are reinforcing a number of our missions in African countries that are Commonwealth countries. I am sure that my hon. Friend approves of that.

In seeking to manage the Foreign and Commonwealth Office overseas estate and to deliver the best possible value for money, the Government always consider whether there is a sound business case for co-location. That

[Mr Henry Bellingham]

might be as part of a drive towards closer working relations between the FCO and other Government Departments that are represented overseas—for example, operating from the same platform and sharing common services. We already look at co-locating with other countries' representations, including those from various Commonwealth countries. In every case, our approach is the same: to ensure that we achieve the best possible combination of operational capability, value for money, and the safety and security of those working for the British Government overseas.

I assure my hon. Friend that very often we look to Commonwealth countries to form such a partnership. We are building partnerships with our Commonwealth partners on this issue where it makes sense for us to do so. For example, our high commission in Bamako is co-located with the Canadian representation, and we also sub-let space to the Canadians in Baghdad. We allow New Zealand to share our embassy facilities in Kabul. We are actively exploring other opportunities that may make a sound business case and offer value for money for Her Majesty's Government.

The UK also shares embassy facilities with non-Commonwealth partners where it meets our requirements. Some of these partnerships include co-locating embassies with other countries. For example, when I was in Tanzania, I went to Dar es Salaam, where our high commission sub-lets space to the Dutch and the Germans. That makes sense, and there is absolutely no reason at all, where we build a new high commission or new embassy, not to sub-let space to our Commonwealth friends. In fact, I can think of one African country where we are looking at a new build and are actively discussing that option with a number of our key Commonwealth partners. I assure my hon. Friend that we are very much on the case.

I would like to say something about the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, and hope that this part of the speech will also answer some of the questions posed by my hon. Friend. I would like to conclude by informing the House of the UK's aims for the CHOGM in Perth later this month. At this meeting, Heads will have a chance to consider the recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group, to examine the findings of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group review, and to discuss some of the complex global challenges that we all face. I pay tribute to the work done by the EPG. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) serves on that group in a very distinguished capacity. The group's report is excellent and I commend it to my hon. Friend.

The EPG's recommendations, and those set out in the CMAG review, answer some of the points that my hon. Friend mentioned with regard to his vision of a common Commonwealth foreign policy. I do not think that we will go quite as far as he would like to go, but there are a number of suggestions in those two reports that would certainly please him and which we can regard as very positive. The EPG report also contains important recommendations on modernisation and we strongly support that part of its work. Its emphasis on democracy, development and good governance in the Commonwealth will help to strengthen the organisation and focus its work on those core values, particularly where it can really make a difference. It offers an important opportunity to shape the future role of the Commonwealth, a role that will have more impact on our networked world.

We want a strengthened Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group that protects our values, but also offers encouragement to those facing challenges to democratic development. The Commonwealth is ideally placed to tackle the global issues facing us today, not least in the current economic downturn. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the membership includes many of the great markets of today and tomorrow. The middle class in the Commonwealth has expanded by nearly 1 billion in the past 20 years, and over $3 trillion worth of trade happens every year in the Commonwealth. Its importance in the world trading community is huge; it is vital to the recovery that western economies are going to make, largely through an export-led drive. We want the Commonwealth to lift the prosperity of all its members through increased free and fair trade. More democracy means greater confidence in investment conditions and in creating the environment for business to flourish, leading to more jobs and greater prosperity.

As I said in my speech to the Royal Commonwealth Society last month, the Commonwealth can also play a helpful role in tackling climate change. The diversity of our economies means that we hold a wide pool of solutions, from governance structures to policies. A united position on climate change at CHOGM would send a strong signal to the international community ahead of the UN climate conference in Durban in November.

On the drive to secure a binding world deal on climate change, most of the countries at the ambitious end of the spectrum are Commonwealth countries. COP 17 in Durban is the African Conference of the Parties. I have been impressed by the extent to which a number of key Commonwealth partners have really engaged with this agenda, not just looking to support the UK's ambitions for a binding global treaty, but looking at some other areas of crucial importance such as mitigation and adaptation, the forestry agenda and the crucial boost we need to give to renewable technology and renewable transmission. As we push hard the agenda of low carbon and high growth, that has a resonance in a lot of Commonwealth countries. They see that they can bypass the stage from early development, miss out on some of the polluting, high-emitting technologies that we have in the west and go straight to the more environmentally friendly green technologies, not just for their power solutions but for many of their other requirements. That is an exciting agenda and we have the support of those countries.

In conclusion, the UK Government are committed to reinvigorating the Commonwealth. We want to strengthen it as a focus for development, democracy and prosperity. My hon. Friend said that he was going to put the "C" back into the FCO. This is work in progress, but we are absolutely determined to keep up the pressure. I am grateful to him, because it is knowledge and expertise from parliamentarians such as him that will help us with that agenda.

Question put and agreed to.

4.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 October 2011

[MR MIKE WEIR *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

The Riots

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Michael Fabricant.)*

2.30 pm

Gavin Barwell (Croydon Central) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Weir.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to secure the debate. The riots in early August took place in many parts of the country, but the images that many will long remember—the House of Reeves furniture store on fire, Monika Konczyk jumping from a first floor window—were images of my home town. It is good to see the right hon. Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) here. We represent different parties in this House. He may not agree with everything I have to say today, but we are united in our determination to uncover the facts about what happened on that night, and to see something positive come from the ashes at Reeves Corner and along the London road in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Richard Ottaway) has asked me to put on record his apologies for not being here; he is abroad on Foreign Affairs Committee business.

On 11 August, the House had just over four hours to debate what happened in many parts of London and in some of our major cities. Many hon. Members, including some whose constituencies were affected, did not get to speak. Although the work of the Riots, Communities And Victims Panel and the Metropolitan police's own internal review are still ongoing, two months on we have a much clearer picture of what happened, what the appropriate lessons are for public policy and what still needs to be done.

I want to start with the issue of who, or what, was responsible. Much media coverage in the immediate aftermath of the riots featured the term, "feral youth". The implication was of a lot of teenagers on the rampage. There was also a lot of discussion about whether this was a direct result of the very difficult decisions that the Government have made in relation to public spending.

Talking to my borough commander, and having had the opportunity to review much of the CCTV footage in Croydon, it is clear that there was a significant degree of organisation—it was not just a spontaneous protest. According to figures from the Prince's Trust, 19% of those in London who have been arrested are known gang members. Undoubtedly, a number of others who were arrested are involved in gangs, although that involvement may not yet be known to the police. Data published in September by the Ministry of Justice showed that, of the 1,715 who came before the courts by midday on 12 September, 73% had a previous caution or conviction, and the average number of offences that they were guilty of was 15.

On the age of those responsible, the Ministry of Justice figures for the whole country show that 21% of those who came before the courts were under the age of 18. Some 52% were under the age of 21. The figures that I have obtained from the borough commander in Croydon show that the age profile of those involved in the offences in Croydon is significantly older. Just 15% of those arrested are under the age 18, and only 38% are under the age of 21. The picture given that it was just teenagers who were responsible for these offences is therefore highly inaccurate. I think that all hon. Members on both sides of the House will want to regret the demonisation of a whole generation of young people.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend is building a powerful case. Does he agree—he has already presented some figures—that those involved in the riots in London, as with the disturbances in Gloucester, were mostly people with previous convictions or warnings? Although there is much to be done to highlight opportunities, especially employment opportunities, we should not confuse the treatment of one with work on the other. Responsibility is key.

Gavin Barwell: I agree. Both are issues, but we should start with the individual responsibility of those involved. I will come on to develop both of those points during my speech.

The first lesson is the importance of tackling gang culture. My starting point on the issue is that this is not just a matter for the police. We cannot simply enforce the problem away. We also need to offer a way out of gangs to young people, many of whom may have felt pressured, in terms of their own safety, to get involved. We need to work with the local communities that are suffering from this problem to ensure that they are involved in bringing peer pressure to bear on those who are involved. There is a lot in the Centre for Social Justice report, "Dying to belong", which was published in February 2009.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is talking about breaking gang culture. Does he agree that young people tend to be drawn to gang culture largely because of a lack of good role models in the community, a poverty of aspiration and the lack of social mobility in our country?

Gavin Barwell: Those are all factors. We could also look at family breakdown, and particularly a lack of male role models across the piece. As I said, the CSJ report has compelling analysis about what leads people to get involved. I look forward to the Government's statement, which, the Minister may confirm, should be made in a couple of weeks' time, on how they intend to respond.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I commend the role that he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks) played during the disorder. As he knows, the Home Affairs Committee is conducting an inquiry and is coming to Croydon on 21 October. Has he had an opportunity to look at the evidence that Bill Bratton and the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner gave to the Select Committee on Tuesday, when there was a comparison between gang culture in this country and in the United States? Does

[Keith Vaz]

the hon. Gentleman think that that could be helpful, as we try to fashion an acceptable way of dealing with the problem?

Gavin Barwell: I am grateful to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. I have not had a chance to see that evidence. When I leave the Chamber, I will look at it. It is important to look at what has been achieved elsewhere in the UK and abroad to deal with these problems. I will now try to make a bit of progress, because I want to allow all the hon. Members here to contribute to the debate.

The second lesson is one that the Secretary of State for Justice has set out clearly: it is about changing how our prisons operate in order to tackle the issue of reoffending. Clearly, many of the people who were involved in these disturbances had been through our prison system, and it did not do anything to change their pattern of behaviour.

On the police response, the briefing that all London Members have received from the Metropolitan police tells us that there were 3,380 officers on duty on the Saturday, 4,275 on duty on the Sunday, 6,000 on the Monday when the disturbances in Croydon took place, and 16,000 on the Tuesday. It then, with commendable honesty, states:

> "Were adequate resources deployed"

over the weekend and on the Monday?

> "With the benefit of hindsight the answer would have to be no."

I think that all hon. Members who represent London constituencies would share that judgment.

The third lesson for the Government is clearly that police numbers matter. Yes, the police cannot be exempt from the need to save money to deal with the deficit that we have inherited. Yes, we can do much, much more to ensure that more police officers spend their time actively and visibly on patrol on our streets. At the end of last year, however, the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice said:

> "I don't think anyone…would make a simple link between the increase in the numbers of police officers and what has happened to crime. There is no such link."

When the riots broke out, the response of the Government and the police was a two-and-a-half-fold increase in the number of police officers on the streets—and it worked. The Government are right to say that numbers are not the only game in town, but they are clearly an important part of it.

The performance of the police from Tuesday 9 August onwards was significantly better. I had the pleasure—on the Tuesday, when the Mayor of London came to Croydon—to meet the person who is now the new Metropolitan Police Commissioner, and was enormously impressed with a pep talk that I overheard him give to a number of officers who went through a very difficult time the night before. A much more robust approach from the police, in terms of breaking up groups of people who were attempting to form, is what prevented further disturbances from happening. It has also been enormously important to see police officers proactively going out, knocking down doors and arresting suspects in the early hours of the morning. It is important that the people involved in the disturbances do not feel, and their friends and neighbours do not feel, that they won—that they beat the police. The robust approach that we have seen since then is important.

Mike Weatherley (Hove) (Con): I ask this question as the chair of the all-party group on retail and business crime. A lot of retailers feel that crime against their shops is seen as a victimless crime. Does my hon. Friend agree that a lot of people who were committing these crimes felt that they were committing a victimless crime because in the past sentencing had not been robust enough?

Gavin Barwell: I will come on to sentencing in a second, but anyone under the illusion that those crimes were victimless should consider the experience in Croydon. As I am sure the right hon. Member for Croydon North will say, the devastated shops were not those of the major multinational businesses but of small businesses—family businesses on one premises—often owned by members of the black and minority ethnic community. The crimes were absolutely not victimless.

As of 10 October, 2,819 arrests had been made throughout London and 1,700 people charged. The cost of that operation so far to the police in Croydon is £1.4 million. Clearly, the police face a difficult time on budgets, so who will pay for that? On 11 August, the Prime Minister said on the Floor of the House:

> "the bill for the Metropolitan police force for the past few days will be large and, if they continue to deploy in those numbers, it will get larger and the Treasury will stand behind that."—[*Official Report*, 11 August 2011; Vol. 531, c. 1065.]

There is still uncertainty in the Metropolitan police about where the money is coming from, and I hope that the Minister will provide reassurance.

Jonathan Evans (Cardiff North) (Con): As well as the policing costs, under the Riot (Damages) Act 1886 responsibility for uninsured losses falls on police authorities. Even if insurance claims are paid, the insurers who have paid may recover their loss from the police authorities. Two days ago, in the House, that figure was estimated to be £330 million. Does that not add some force to my hon. Friend's point?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend has real expertise in the area and he makes a powerful point. We need reassurance on both those issues. I will now make some progress, if hon. Members will permit me, because I want to allow time for everyone present to speak in the debate.

The Metropolitan police estimates that in London alone there are more than 20,000 hours of closed-circuit TV to view. That gives rise to a lesson and to a question. The lesson is the importance of CCTV. There are legitimate civil liberties concerns—no Member would want our country covered in surveillance cameras—but CCTV has played a crucial role in bringing people guilty of offences to justice. I was much encouraged that on 11 August the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary made more positive noises about the contribution that CCTV can make. I understand why the Government wish to ensure that, when a system is introduced, the proper checks are made, but I will be grateful to hear from the Minister that the Government recognise the important contribution that CCTV can make to deterring crime and catching criminals.

My question concerns the police estimate that it will take nearly 12 months to review the remaining evidence. The Government must ask whether it is reasonable for such a review to take that long. If not, the Met police will need assistance from outside London, not to patrol the streets as they did in the immediate aftermath of the riots, but to get through all the evidence.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Barwell: I will, for the last time, but then I must make progress.

Heidi Alexander: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing the debate.

In Lewisham, the borough commander tells me that he has a team of 25 police officers currently reviewing some of that CCTV footage and investigating the riots. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about the potential impact on other policing in the borough, given the amount of resource dedicated to that?

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Lady makes a good point. For a few weeks after the riots, the public understood the need to concentrate all resources on the operation but, clearly, carrying that on for a whole year would impact on other areas of police work.

The next issue I want to refer to is the crucial one of intelligence. Crimestoppers has made a great contribution. The police will say that they were receiving intelligence from people who would not normally provide it. In the two weeks before the Conservative party conference, however, I visited every school and sixth-form college in my constituency, to talk to young people about their attitudes. On the vast suite of issues, their views were similar to those of my middle-aged and more elderly constituents, but on one issue there is a difference: their attitude towards the police. Young people of all backgrounds, but in particular young black men, do not have confidence that the police are there and on their side. I am in my late 30s, and it seems to me that the police have moved on a long way from the situation when I was growing up, but it is clear that a significant problem remains. The police must ensure that they win the respect and trust of the people they are policing. Policing in this country is based on the principle of policing by consent. At the moment, that consent is not there from crucial sections of the community that they need to police.

In Croydon, as in many other areas of the country, there was a huge public response, which was seen in the clean-up afterwards and in donations of money to help rebuild the House of Reeves store and some of the other damaged properties. Since the riots, I have seen more than 60 people in my surgery who have had ideas for projects to work with young people and to stop such events happening again. Government and local government must ask how we co-ordinate that upsurge of good will and ensure that some of those projects come to fruition.

I also wish to touch on the issue of bringing those responsible to justice. First, I want to praise the courts for the speed of their response. Court staff, some of whom may well be made redundant over the coming months as a result of the savings being made, went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that the courts processed cases quickly. There must be a question for the Ministry of Justice about whether that swifter process of justice can be maintained so that those who have committed violent crimes are taken to court sooner, rather than after often long delays.

The Ministry of Justice research tells us that those who committed offences during the riots were more likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence and a longer sentence than if they had committed the same offence a month earlier. I spent much of the summer defending that sentencing approach against various eminent lawyers on TV and radio, because it has done much to restore faith in our criminal justice system. I quote what his honour Judge Andrew Gilbert, QC, said when sentencing defendants at Manchester Crown court:

> "The people of Manchester and Salford are all entitled to look to the law for protection and to the courts to punish those who behaved so outrageously. It would be wholly unreal therefore for me to have regard only to the specific acts which you committed as if they had been committed in isolation...Those acts were not committed in isolation and, as I have already indicated, it is a fact which substantially aggravates the gravity of this offence. The court has to pay regard to the level and nature of the criminal conduct that night, to its scale, the extent to which it was premeditated, the number of persons engaged…and finally…the specific acts of the individual defendant...For the purposes of these sentences, I have no doubt at all that the principal purpose is that the Courts should show that outbursts of criminal behaviour like this will be and must be met with sentences longer than they would be if the offences had been committed in isolation."

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I entirely agree with those sentiments, but does my hon. Friend accept my view that sentencing should and must remain an issue for an independent judiciary, whether courts or magistrates? The bigger concern was that some of the exemplary sentences in the immediate aftermath were being egged on by the political class or the press, and it would be a retrograde step for justice to be meted out in that way and not left firmly in the hands of those who are experienced in sentencing matters.

Gavin Barwell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Decisions on individual sentences must be for judges and magistrates. It is reasonable for us as Members of Parliament to reflect in generality the views of our constituents, but the individual decisions must remain with judges and magistrates.

I wish to comment on some figures from my borough commander about the impact on crime resulting from that sentencing approach. If we compare Croydon in the period of 17 July to 14 August—including the day when the riots took place—with the period of 15 August to 11 September, property crime is well down, as we would expect because a huge number of property offences were committed on 8 August, but violent crime is down by more than 20%. That seems to show clearly that we are offered a false choice on crime and punishment, between those who argue for a tough punishment and that prison works and those who say that it and rehabilitation do not work and that people come out and reoffend. It seems to me that both those things are true: removing dangerous, violent people from the streets gives a break to the law-abiding and leads to a reduction in crime, but we must also reform our prisons so that they do a more effective job of rehabilitating people and changing their pattern of behaviour.

[Gavin Barwell]

Finally, I want to turn to some of the underlying issues and come back to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). It is important that Government and Opposition politicians reflect on some of their long-held views. When I listened to the statement and the debate on 11 August, some argued that the disorder was purely a matter of criminality and moral failing, while others argued that it was all about inequality and unfairness in society. It seems to me, again, that both arguments have some merit.

Clearly, there are issues about parenting and a lack of fathers. As a man, I certainly feel that there is a real role for making the case for the responsibility that men have, if they were present when the child was conceived, for the rest of that child's life.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gavin Barwell: I need to make a little more progress, because I am conscious of time.

Clearly, we need to be careful about generalising. Several of my friends were brought up by single mums who did a great job, so we must not demonise any class of parents. There is, however, an issue about a lack of fathers and definitely an issue about people witnessing or experiencing violence at home. The WAVE Trust report in 2005 pointed that out strongly. There is a great community group in Croydon called Lives Not Knives, which works with ex-gang members, and I sat in one of its seminars about a month before the riots and listened to four ex-gang members, all of whom had either personally experienced or witnessed traumatic violence at a young age. There is a clear link between that and violent conduct later in life. I welcome what the Government are doing to address problem families and community budgeting. More could be done to promote fostering and adoption to take young people out of the care system, and clearly we must address educational disadvantage, exclusion and truancy.

I shall end by mentioning three issues to which I do not have a solution, but are relevant to the debate. On youth unemployment I obtained figures from the Library showing the trend in general unemployment versus youth unemployment over the past 20 years under Governments of all political complexions. In 1992, youth unemployment was two thirds higher than general unemployment. By 1997, it was double general unemployment; by 2001, it was 140% of the general unemployment rate; and in 2005, it was 165% of the general unemployment rate. We must address the other factors that are making it much harder for young people to find work in our society, relative to the general population.

We must also address the culture of materialism in society, which is one factor behind the behaviour we saw. It is clear from the situation in Croydon that there is an inextricable link between gang culture and the drugs trade. We must address the issue of how we deal with illegal drug use in our country.

I do not pretend to have answers to all the problems, but the emerging evidence of what happened throughout the country in early August has clear lessons for public policy. I look forward to hearing the contributions from other hon. Members.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Mike Weir (in the Chair): Order. As many hon. Members want to speak in the debate, I encourage brevity.

2.51 pm

Mr Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on a subject that has rightly attracted a great deal of attention and comment. I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) on securing the debate, and on his speech, which demonstrated a thoughtful, serious and insightful analysis, almost all of which I agree with—I hope that that does not embarrass him.

The three issues that I intend to cover are the causes of the riots, the immediate response by the police, emergency services and other public authorities, as well as the general public, and longer-term considerations, including measures that might help to prevent a repetition.

I shall start with the causes, and the factors that contributed to the worst outbreak of civil disturbance that the country has experienced in at least 30 years. In the immediate aftermath of the riots, we heard some over-confident and sometimes simplistic analyses of the causes. The hon. Gentleman rightly illustrated the fact that the extent to which people wanted to blame it entirely on criminality, or entirely on social and economic factors, was wide of the mark. Clearly, some people involved were criminals with previous convictions, and some of the activity was straightforward criminality. The extent to which many criminals descended on a retail parade in Charlton when they received a message that it was unprotected and open seemed to suggest straightforward criminality. It was certainly an orgy of looting.

That leaves the question of why the outbreak of theft should have occurred on that particular occasion. What was the trigger that prompted the multiple incidents in London and other cities during the period 6 to 9 August? Similarly, it is too simplistic to attribute the riots only to social and economic factors, even if it remains true that in general the more deprived areas bore the brunt of the rioting. In my constituency, Woolwich probably has the greatest deprivation, and it was the epicentre of the rioting, whereas more affluent areas such as west Greenwich were largely unscathed.

In trying to understand why the riots occurred, I spent some time reviewing the evidence, including some revealing CCTV footage from Woolwich town centre. I watched it with our police borough commander, Richard Wood, and I suspect that I went through a similar process as did the hon. Gentleman, who undertook a similar review of the evidence with his borough commander.

The CCTV evidence from Woolwich makes it clear that the incidents that occurred in the early part of the evening of 8 August, while groups of youths were gathering in and around General Gordon square, which is the heart of Woolwich town centre, could be categorised generally as antisocial behaviour. However, from around 8.15 that evening, the mood changed, and within a short time a police car had been attacked and set on fire, a public house had been looted and set on fire, and a large-scale riot had begun to take root. It caused extensive damage to other premises in General Gordon square, as well as adjoining Powis street and further away on trading estates along the Woolwich road into Charlton as far as the Greenwich peninsula.

In my view, the change from a potentially problematic display of antisocial behaviour to a full-blown riot occurred when the group of young people who had gathered in the area realised that the police did not have the numbers or capability to stop them. Within a very short time, from their understanding, the police were powerless to prevent disorder, and the situation in Woolwich and the surrounding area was out of control.

I want to stress four specific points. First, the London borough of Greenwich had not suffered the disturbance that had affected other areas, such as Tottenham and Lewisham, on the previous days, and there had been no serious incidents or riots early in the evening of 8 August in Woolwich, so under existing procedures—within the Metropolitan police in London and more widely with other police authorities—for mutual aid, some officers were withdrawn from the borough of Greenwich to provide assistance elsewhere. That is why police numbers in Woolwich were inadequate to cope with the riot when it took place. I want to make it clear that that was not a local failure, but it reflects on the arrangements applying throughout the Metropolitan police area because there were simply insufficient police to contain the riot when it kicked off in Woolwich.

Secondly, I referred to the people gathered in and around General Gordon square as youths. That does not mean that they were predominantly young people. Yes, some juveniles were involved, and some young people under 18 were arrested and charged, but in my judgment the majority of those involved were over 18, and were probably in the age bracket 18 to 25, although some were older. There were some shocking images of people who should have been exercising a mature influence clearly egging on other rioters and benefiting from the chaotic situation.

Thirdly, those involved in the riots, and those who were consequently charged with criminal acts, came from different ethnic backgrounds. The Greenwich and Woolwich constituency is a diverse community with representatives of many different ethnic groups. That diversity applied equally to those involved in the rioting. It is not the case that one single ethnic group was responsible or even disproportionately involved.

Fourthly, those involved in rioting did not seem to come disproportionately from one location, one part of London or one particular type or tenure of housing. It is important to understand that.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Has my right hon. Friend given some thought to the suggestion that some people should be evicted because of their involvement in the riots? I know that his borough has taken a particular stance on that, and I wonder whether he has any comment to make on it.

Mr Raynsford: I entirely understand that if someone has been guilty of trashing their home, their estate or the area immediately surrounding where they live, it would be appropriate under normal procedures for action to be taken to seek possession of their property because of their behaviour, but a different issue arises if people who have been charged and even convicted of a criminal offence are then deprived of their tenure when they would not be so deprived if they had been convicted of such an offence outside a riot. In the example that I gave, if someone stole some DVDs or videos from an electronics shop during a riot and was, as a result, subject to possession proceedings, it would send an odd message if that applied in that case, but not in the case of someone who had been convicted of stealing videos from an electronics shop in other circumstances. That seems to be the nub of the problem. Tenancy laws must be applied, and they must be applied in relation to the tenancy and its surrounding area, not used as a second means of punishing people who should be punished under the proper processes of the law.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that, in some cases, councils have talked about using eviction laws to punish a whole family where just one person has been involved in rioting? One case, which was announced soon after the riots, involved a mother and her younger son being threatened with eviction because the 17-year-old son was involved in rioting some distance from the home. The mother and her younger son were entirely innocent, but the younger boy was going to be made homeless as a result of something his older brother had done.

Mr Raynsford: My hon. Friend raises an important and complex issue. I hope she will understand that so as to keep my remarks brief I will not go into detail, although she may wish to refer to it in her speech. It is clearly problematic if an attempt to use tenancy law is applied to a wider range of people, including the family of the tenant in question, who have to respond in relation to a particular criminal activity perpetrated by one individual. That area requires thoughtful, rather than knee-jerk, reactions.

Mr Mark Field: *rose—*

David T. C. Davies: *rose—*

Mr Raynsford: I see that I am not succeeding. Will hon. Members please accept that I wish to be brief? I do not want to take up too much time because other hon. Members want to contribute. I have said as much as I wish to on that particular subject, and I will move on because I have other points to stress.

As I said, there was no indication to suggest that the rioters came from one particular location. However, the hon. Member for Croydon Central, and his colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Malcolm Wicks), might be amused at one potentially misleading piece of evidence that I gathered quite early on. I came back from my holiday on 9 August, and one of the first things I did was ask my borough commander for evidence of who was responsible for the disturbances and where they came from. Having checked the people in the cells in Woolwich, he told me that a disproportionate number appeared to come from Croydon. There is a simple explanation for that. Croydon is not full of criminals who converged on Woolwich; rather, their presence reflects the fact that the riots in Croydon occurred earlier in the evening. Once the cells in Croydon

[Mr Raynsford]

were full, the police—quite properly, given Met procedures—used custody suites in neighbouring areas, and cells in Woolwich were used to accommodate a number of people from Croydon.

That is an important lesson in the potential misuse of statistics, and I cite it for that reason. One should be careful to dig down beyond initial, superficial statistics, and understand what lies behind them. I hope that the hon. Member for Croydon Central will forgive me for casting that aspersion on his constituents.

Let me turn to the immediate response to the riots. The situation on Tuesday 9 August was transformed by the deployment of large numbers of police officers in Woolwich and the other parts of the capital affected, and in other areas of the country. Throughout the day, I was bombarded with texts predicting all sorts of problems and threats to various places. I was told that the O2 Centre and Greenwich park were to be attacked, and that various other landmarks in the area would be targeted. That was a measure of the electronic media world in which we live; communications are fast and such rumours can spread quickly. However, although the rumour mill was working overtime, in reality none of those places was trashed or attacked. The presence of large numbers of police completely transformed the situation, and on 9 August, and on subsequent days, there was calm in London. It was not calm elsewhere, and I am aware of problems in other cities, but in London the deployment of the 16,000 police officers, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, had the crucial impact of deterring further trouble. I hope that the review being conducted by the Metropolitan police will reflect on that and make appropriate recommendations.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is being generous with his time. The hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) made a point about the immediate response to the riots being inadequate in terms of police numbers. Those of us who represent constituencies in Manchester and Salford were particularly annoyed that not only were police numbers inadequate to respond to the disturbances on that Tuesday evening, but 100 of our best trained officers had been sent to London. That was one of two major mistakes. The second was that our riot police—in Manchester, the tactical aid unit—are geared up not for highly mobile rioters, but to defend space and property. They need retraining for a different kind of riot.

Mr Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and that issue needs to be considered fully in the evaluation of what happened and in the police review. I hope that the review by the Metropolitan police will reflect on the deployment of appropriate numbers of officers with suitable skills and the ability to cope with such situations, and ensure that we are never again exposed to the risk of a rerun of the events of 8 August.

In Woolwich, and throughout London, we saw the determination of large numbers of our fellow citizens to reclaim their streets. In Greenwich, the local authority, police and other emergency services acted swiftly and efficiently to clear the mess, shore up and secure buildings damaged by fire and looting, and get back to normal as soon as possible. In Woolwich last weekend, we were proud to welcome the 2nd Battalion, the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment on parade in General Gordon square as a clear symbol that Woolwich is back to business as normal. I hasten to add that the military was not there to enforce law and order; it was a purely ceremonial parade by a regiment that is based in Woolwich, and we are proud to have it with us.

What about the longer-term implications of the disturbances? I am not one of those people who fears that we may experience more riots in the immediate future. Apart from the obvious lessons to be learned about police numbers, we should reflect, as the hon. Member for Croydon Central has done, on the effectiveness of CCTV. Those images played a hugely important role in identifying many of those involved in the riots and providing evidence to support prosecution.

I share the hon. Gentleman's view that those who are nervous about the civil liberties implications of the use of CCTV should reflect on that position. CCTV has played a crucial role over the past two and a half months, and continues to do so. The certainty of conviction is a powerful deterrent, and all those who have seen the number of people identified, charged, brought to trial and convicted as a result of that evidence should reflect on the likelihood of the same thing happening again should the disturbances be repeated.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I support the right hon. Gentleman's comments as CCTV has played a fundamental role in the detection of those terrible crimes. I have been involved with the police in looking at crime in my constituency of Stourbridge, and it has been incredibly difficult to obtain CCTV coverage for any area, despite criminal activity being quite high in a particular location.

Mr Raynsford: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point about her constituency, but I hope she will forgive me if I do not respond because it is clearly a different situation from that in Woolwich.

Although to some extent we can be satisfied at the degree to which those responsible for riot, disorder and theft in early August have been brought to justice, we cannot be complacent and we should not ignore warning signs for the future. As I have stressed, we cannot simply blame what happened in August on economic and social factors, but it would be foolish to ignore the truth that widespread unemployment among young people creates a climate of despair and alienation in which those affected may be more vulnerable to influences placed on them and pressures to get involved in criminal or gang activity.

As I have described, in the lead-up to the riot in Woolwich, we saw a gathering of young people who clearly had nothing better to do than hang around the town centre. That powerful image sends a message about the importance of finding more constructive activities for young people in our society. The Government must give the highest priority to reversing the disastrous rising trend of unemployment among young people.

Yesterday, I attended the annual awards ceremony for the Young Builder of the Year. We heard inspiring stories of young people from difficult backgrounds who had overcome huge obstacles to learn the skills and the work ethic necessary to train and succeed in the construction industry. We need to do far more to extend such activities, but sadly, as one of the Youthbuild UK sponsors at the event pointed out, the scope for taking on more young people and extending those training opportunities that have proved so successful is severely limited in the present climate. In particular, he highlighted the loss of the future jobs fund, which has been a major source of opportunities for such people. There are therefore important lessons for the Government to learn from this.

We must also improve opportunities for young people under 18 through youth and sports clubs, so that they can get involved in constructive and healthy activities, rather than possibly being sucked into the fringes of gangs and criminal groupings. Earlier today, I spoke to Councillor Jackie Smith, cabinet member for children and young people in the London borough of Greenwich. She emphasised that the council is seeking to maintain youth services in Greenwich against the background of deep cuts in its budget.

The importance of that issue cannot be over-emphasised, and one point that I want to make in conclusion really reinforces it. Today, I spoke to Naomi Goldberg, who runs Greenwich Action for Voluntary Services, the co-ordinating body for the voluntary sector in Greenwich. It recently conducted a survey among voluntary organisations in the borough, which highlighted a stark difference between organisations working with young people and other voluntary groups in their perception of their relations with the police.

Twenty years ago, the borough had a serious problem with racist crime, which culminated in the killing of Stephen Lawrence. It has been a long, hard fight to improve community relations and relations between the police and ethnic minority groups, but there has generally been significant progress. Relations between adult groupings and the police are generally much better, but as Naomi Goldberg told me today, there is no such confidence among organisations working with young people.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central made the point, which I strongly reinforce, that if we allow young people and the organisations working with them to continue to feel that they do not have a constructive relationship with the police, we will store up all sorts of problems for ourselves. Against the generally positive background of improvements in relations between the police and the community, that is a stark reminder of the importance of tackling this issue, and I hope that the review of the riots being conducted by the Metropolitan police will pay attention to it.

We all have lessons to learn from the rioting in early August. I hope that the debate continues to reflect the wide-ranging experience of different Members and is informed by real understanding of the causes of, and the factors behind, the riots, rather than by some of the rather over-simplistic rhetoric that we heard in the immediate aftermath. If so, I hope we can really tease out the lessons to be learned and ensure that there is a constructive response.

3.12 pm

Nick de Bois (Enfield North) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) on securing the debate. When we compare the contributions so far with the debate in August, it is clear that they reflect a different mood and the thought that has gone into the issue since the riots.

I am conscious of the time, so let me briefly profile the two evenings we experienced in Enfield. I was fortunate—that might sound odd—to witness first hand much of what happened on the first evening. The damage on the Sunday—the first so-called copycat riot—essentially affected the main high street in Enfield town. We should have a clear understanding of what the borough of Enfield is like, because it is not, in its entirety, a typical old-fashioned suburban area. Indeed, some wards have the highest levels of deprivation in Europe. Equally, and strangely, however, many of the incidents took place in the market town area of Enfield town, which is regarded as more prosperous. The high street was completely damaged, and we lost many of the retail stores that one would usually expect to see, including, sadly, a department store that had been trading in the area for more than 35 years, which had its whole frontage damaged.

The arrest data originally pointed to a 50:50 ratio between people from inside and outside the borough. I am, however, conscious of the need not to mislead Parliament, and I should say that this is still a moving picture. Indications suggest that the ratio between people from inside and outside the borough is more like 60:40. However, it is an interesting dynamic, and perhaps the most notable journey undertaken by someone who came for the riots was from Twickenham, which is, of course, on the other side of London.

The youth and adult data are becoming particularly prominent in our discussions. Based on the arrest records, it looks as if about 22% of the offenders who were arrested in Enfield were under 18, but I will say more about that later, if I may.

On the cost, there was not just the immediate cost of the damage. Parts of the borough, which saw riots early on, on the Sunday, closed down early for the following 10 days out of a fear of repeat damage. That meant that traders experienced an extended period of lost business. However, the biggest damage was to our reputation in Enfield. The one thing many people will not forget is the damage to the 250,000 square feet Sony warehouse in the north-east of the borough, which burned for more than a week after the riots. Sadly, that has put at risk up to 250 jobs.

The good news is that the community response to the riots has been nothing short of spectacular. In my discussions with Sony, it has demonstrated a genuine commitment to try to stay in the local area, using its skilled work force. Given the crisis management that it would have needed after the riots, that demonstrates a remarkable leap of good faith, and we hope that it will be successful in its plans to stay.

As regards what we saw on the streets of Enfield, I was enormously impressed by the response from the community. Enfield actually opened for business while riots were still going on in other parts of the country. As a result, community cohesion benefited. I was enormously impressed with the community's leaders, who came together to work with and support the police in the aftermath of the riots. The general relationship between the police and the public, who were very much in evidence in the morning following the riots, has proved a real bonus to the town.

I should draw attention to access to finance, and I have a question for the Minister. Can we have an update on how much finance victims of the riots, including the businesses that suffered, have accessed? The proportion

[Nick de Bois]

of victims in Enfield who have accessed finance is currently extremely low. Our neighbourhood and business community showed grim determination in getting on with things and opening as quickly as possible, although I accept that, aside from what we saw at Sony, the damage we suffered was nothing like that suffered in the constituencies of Members representing Croydon. However, it would be useful to know where we are on access to finance.

I may be agreeing with the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford), and I hope that will not embarrass him. I have shifted my opinion slightly. I was firmly in the camp that saw these events as pure criminal behaviour, and I hope Members will understand why. Anyone who stood with residents on the streets and witnessed gangs of marauding thugs trashing the town and people's gardens before jumping into their souped-up cars clutching their loot to drive away and cause more damage elsewhere would understand people's intense anger. I shared that anger, and I believed that what we had seen was nothing less than pure criminal behaviour, but I accept that, when one looks at these things in context, there are other issues to address. Indeed, I will be happy to address them shortly and, I assure Members, briefly.

In my discussions with the police, we identified three types of rioters. There was the G8 rioter—the person who was, as far as we could tell, probably behind much of the social media organisation. They came simply to trash the corporate stores and lay waste to businesses, however small or large. The police tell me that there was also an element who were simply there for a fight with them, and that is what sparked the serious events, such as the overturning of a public disorder van carrying a number of police—actually, they did not quite overturn it, but they certainly trashed it. Then there were the looters. However, among those were many people who were caught up simply because they were present. Gracia McGrath, the chief executive of an early intervention charity, Chance UK, said:

> "Let me put it in context. If you are 10 or 11 years old, and you go out on the streets not knowing whether or not to join it, and you see adults, some of whom you know (mothers, learning assistants and postmen have been amongst the people arrested so far) setting fire to property, looting and throwing stones at the police, why would you think it was wrong?"

I thought about that comment, and I think there is significant truth in it. Young people who were involved were initially entirely demonised but, considering the context of what they witnessed being done by so-called responsible adults, I have tempered my views, and I believe that we have much more work to do in early intervention programmes to secure the future for some younger children than I first thought. I acknowledge that.

Nevertheless, hon. Members will understand that I welcome the stiff penalties that were given. There is no question in my mind but that anything less would have been an invitation to do more of the same. I accept the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field) that it is entirely up to the courts to undertake the sentencing process. If hon. Members feel that some sentences were extreme, the due process of appeal will deal with that. It is not for politicians or others to interfere.

I am a school governor and have seen that there are children who have a family background that would not be recognised by anyone in this Chamber as a family. I have become acutely aware of the link between such backgrounds and the growing trend for youngsters to get engaged in gangs. It does not surprise me that there is evidence to suggest that some co-ordination, rioting and looting happened in areas affected by gangs. At the moment, gangs will sometimes look to primary school children who have no sense of order, boundaries or discipline in their homes—such as they are. The gangs offer an alternative environment for them. The work that the Government are now focused on, to deal with gangs in early intervention programmes, will bring major, significant improvements to our country in the next few years.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his interesting and thoughtful analysis of some of the root causes of the summer riots. We were grateful that there were no riots in my constituency, but I urge hon. Members not to forget that many of the factors identified as underlying causes of riots are still present in places that did not riot. Early intervention and other programmes should be considered on a nationwide basis, and not simply in reaction to events.

Nick de Bois: I thank the hon. Lady; it is all too easy to focus on areas where there were riots, and not to recognise that there may be issues elsewhere.

I welcome the work of Enfield council, where a cross-party team has been put together to try, essentially, to answer the question "Why Enfield?" Why was Enfield one of the areas hit by riots? Why did the participants choose to riot, and what was the make-up of the group of rioters? The youth offending service is undertaking excellent work with those who have offended, by talking to them and asking them those simple questions—not remotely or on paper, but in one-to-one interviews. That information will be made available to the Enfield council cross-party group, which I am sure is looking forward to seeing it.

I still think we must be patient to understand fully what went on. There was tremendous unwanted and criminal behaviour, which should have been punished. The context—and I welcome the tone of today's debate—is that we are right to examine a little deeper the causes of what happened.

3.25 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) for initiating the debate, and for the manner in which he made his remarks. I, too, agree with most, though not all, of what he said, and I am sure that that does not embarrass him. It is a good thing that the House can come to some agreement about the issues.

I hope that hon. Members will recognise that for the constituency of Tottenham this has been the most disturbing of summers, and I want to make my remarks in the context of what the riots mean for our country as a whole. For any constituency to experience two riots within a generation is a major tragedy—not just for that constituency, but for the country. When I was 13, I was growing up yards from the Broadwater Farm estate, and for me it has been poignant and stressful to represent the constituency 25 years later. I know what it is for someone to grow up in Tottenham, and to fill in double the number of application forms, because they must fill in the N17 or N15 postcode and are worried that they will not get an interview as they are from Tottenham. A huge stigma attached to my constituency for many years. Indeed, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) ran against me when I was first selected for the constituency and she will recall that in 2000 that stigma remained.

I think that, despite much deprivation and poverty, before August this year most people, when they thought of Tottenham, thought of the football club and whether it was staying or going, not of the riots, so it is particularly tragic for the constituency that they happened. Many people have asked me whether things have changed and are moving on. Of course, there is tremendous resilience in the people of Tottenham. I might say, as a son of Tottenham, that there is tremendous resilience in me. However, there is obviously deep frustration, anger and fury that the riots should have happened. It is right to express my constituents' concern that the riots might not have needed to happen, which brings me to the incident that started the summer of unrest—the death of Mark Duggan in the Tottenham Hale area of my constituency.

If there has been any success in policing in our country, and in most developed countries, in the past 20 to 25 years—this is a matter beyond party allegiance—it has been down to the innovations behind community and neighbourhood policing. I am proud of my party's record in bringing that forward, but it is something that, across political parties, we cherish and want to encourage.

The real tragedy of what happened at the beginning of August was a total breakdown, it seems to me, in community policing. We had an Operation Trident incident that the local police did not know about. A young man lost his life, and his family found out about it on television. All of us who are parents know that there is that fear—

3.30 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.45 pm

On resuming—

Mr Lammy: Before the Division, I was talking about community policing—its successes, but also a breakdown that I think happened in this case. A Trident operation was taking place in Tottenham Hale in my constituency. It is not clear at this stage what that operation was about or why it chose to enter into what led to firearms being discharged in a busy traffic area at the height of commuter time on the Thursday evening before the riots.

I am deeply concerned that many London MPs—indeed, MPs across the country—have got used to a scenario in which they tend to be more comfortable with local police with local intelligence and connections. However, if police come into their area for any kind of operation, they are far more nervous. Often, when things do not go according to plan, that involves officers coming into the area. In looking at the matter—I know that there are several inquiries—we need to reflect on how operations beyond a local area can use local knowledge and intelligence. I do not know the circumstances of the operation or why it took place, but clearly it led to the death of Mark Duggan.

Mr Mark Field: I accept some of the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman has put into mind. We all appreciate in London that community policing needs to be by consent, and there were clearly issues in the case. However, another aspect of communication was lacking in the Tottenham case, something he might come on to.

A deep concern for many of us present is that, almost at a mendacious level, the Metropolitan police, through its communications department, put out only part of the story. The rumour that went round was that there had been an exchange of fire, which clearly was not the case. If that had been an isolated incident, we might have put it to one side, but as we all know, there were similar issues regarding the death of Jean Charles de Menezes on 22 July 2005. That is a deep concern, beyond the usual suspects of those who might be concerned about police behaviour. There is a sense that, all too often, the police try to get across a communication with a spin approach in relation to activities in which tragic deaths occur. That all too often begins to unravel rapidly, with the terrible results that we saw in August.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. With great sadness, I say that, for the first time in many years, there is a strong sense of "them and us" in communities such as the one I represent. It seems that the Metropolitan police is unable not to close ranks or not see briefings on a particular incident filter out before the facts have been properly and independently assessed. Of course, for those who were looking on at the incident—this was in a place with busy traffic, and many people were in the local area—the account that they picked up in the initial radio and television broadcasts and the papers the next day did not accord with what they themselves had seen. Immediately, in the hours that followed, there was a trust deficit and a breakdown of the sense of policing by consent, whereby the community and the police work side by side and recognise that, in any organisation, things can and do go wrong, and individuals can make the wrong judgment. Of course, I do not pass judgment on what happened.

Then we had the Independent Police Complaints Commission, which has sought to apologise for its press office briefing in which it was said that Mark Duggan had fired a gun. It turned out that that statement was wholly premature and wholly untrue. My community needs to believe in the IPCC after the catastrophe that was the Police Complaints Authority. Mistakes such as that statement are catastrophic for that trust.

All of us who are parents know that feeling when our children leave the house: we have this paranoid sense that something is going to go wrong and we think: "They are not going to come back. Somebody is going to knock on my door." Every parent who experiences the death of a child deserves a better service. The fact that things did not happen in the appropriate way is surely something that shames us all. This family found themselves stuck in the middle. The local police say, "It is not our responsibility. We have to back off now." The national organisation says, "Is this our responsibility? Are we meant to do this?" The following day, after the

[Mr Lammy]

liaison has not gone appropriately, people find out from the television what has happened, and rumours begin to circulate because of a disjunction between what communities saw and what is being briefed and said. There is a peaceful protest outside the police station, which is not unusual in the context of my constituency and other constituencies in London when someone dies following police contact. The appropriate senior officer is not there. It takes some time to get someone there, then answers are not forthcoming in the way the family expect and want. We know what happens as a consequence.

The Metropolitan police understand that there must be an inquiry on the matter to see what led up to the riots. The IPCC is also inquiring into those initial few hours and what role they played. The consequence of the actions has been huge.

I, too, have sat with the deputy borough commander and looked at the footage of what took place in Tottenham on that night—that was at my request. The scenes that I saw were some of the most depressing I have ever witnessed. I have sat with families who have been victims of knife crimes and I have done some inquest cases that involved some horrific things, but the scenes that I saw were depressing. I expected to see anger and frustration on the faces of some of those who were attacking Tottenham high road, but instead I saw joy and happiness. That is why it was so depressing.

I was categorical in my condemnation of what we saw in Tottenham on that Saturday night and Sunday morning. There can be no excuse whatever for the large-scale arson that we saw in London. The fact that no one is dead as a consequence is truly amazing. We saw 56 properties burn to the ground and 50 families lost their homes and all their possessions. Young children are still experiencing nightmares as a consequence of what happened and independent shopkeepers, the vast majority of whom have migrated to this country, again face financial ruin as a consequence of riots. That is totally unacceptable. People who get up every single day to go to work had their businesses burned to the ground. I caution those who rush to make excuses for this kind of behaviour because it is wholly unacceptable and we must remain firm on the choice that people have to make.

We had a debate earlier this week about some of the underlying causes of gun violence. I remember a difficult period in the late 1970s and early 1980s when young people such as me had a choice about whether to get caught up with the mob. I made my choice back then and I stand by it now. I will not, 25 years later, change my mind about the difference between right and wrong when it leads to such loss for ordinary, decent, hard-working people. The attack on the community and the police was ferocious. I saw scenes on the video that looked a bit like Grand Theft Auto. Young people were lining up trolleys to barricade themselves away from the police. Extinguishers were thrown at the police and a gun was pulled on them. We saw people casually setting fire to buildings.

When I was rung by the police on the Saturday evening and told that a car was burning outside the police station, my first response was to wonder why the car was left in the way that it was by the police. I then hoped that the fire would be put out quickly. A second car was set on fire, then a bus was set alight. I wondered why the initial policing was not there, because Spurs were playing and there was a huge police presence in the area.

What took place across the rest of the country in the days ahead was mirrored in the London borough of Haringey. The Tottenham retail park was looted for hours and no police were present. When the manager of Comet showed me the photographs and the CCTV footage of what took place, it was clear that there were more people in his shop that night than are ever there during the day. Although the lights were off, it was like Christmas day because the lights from people's mobile phones could be seen. People were looking for goods and helping themselves. The place had nothing left in it by morning, and that is one of the biggest and most successful Comets in the country. We do not need to talk about JD Sports; that had the same image in the Tottenham retail area. Wood Green, one of our important shopping areas in north London, was totally ransacked for hours and hours.

What happens when good, hard-working people who live in those areas see no policing? Bad news is the consequence. Young teenagers who may never have been involved with the police get caught up. The same is true of those who are in their 20s, which was the profile of many of those who were arrested. This cannot be the formula for proper policing by consent. As MP for Tottenham, I understand the consequences and issues of that night. I have to raise million of pounds to regenerate the area. Who will provide that money?

I am pleased, of course, that the Mayor of London has allocated initial funds for the riot area, but the irony is that the two areas of London that were bidding to become enterprise zones were Croydon and Tottenham. The reason that we spent most of last year fighting each other to get an enterprise zone, and demanding of the Mayor that we get one, is that the scale of regeneration necessary in Tottenham, even before the riots, was on a par with that in other parts of the country that have seen far greater regeneration. I am talking about Salford and parts of Manchester, parts of Birmingham and the Olympic area. Tottenham will need a far bigger story than the neighbourhood renewal that is being proposed. I believe that the community in Tottenham deserves that regeneration. We need jobs. I need the other half of the BBC. I need some major back-office Departments or quangos. Tottenham deserves that, Edmonton deserves it and the wider north-east London area deserves it. I hope that the community will now get it.

[KATY CLARK *in the Chair*]

There has been some suggestion that if Spurs stay in the local area and renew their ground, that will be enough. Of course it will not be enough. I want Spurs to stay in the area, but a football club cannot possibly be the anchor of regeneration in an area that is struggling so much, such as Tottenham. There are big questions about the policing, and therefore about what the regeneration response will be as a result of the damage that was caused.

I want to raise a couple of other issues in relation to the broader issue of policing with consent. The first is that I have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to police with consent if the police do not reflect and look like the community that they serve. I hope that hon. Members will understand that I am not talking now in a sort of old-fashioned, socialist, equal opportunity kind of way. I am talking about pragmatic policing and how to police a busy urban area. It cannot be acceptable that, despite the advances that have been made, we have 32,441 police officers in the Met and only 867 of them are from a black or black British background. Just 4.7% of the police officers in the country are from ethnic minorities.

We all know London and we all recognise that there are boroughs in London, such as my own, where more than half the people in the community are from an ethnic minority background. If we are not to walk down the road that America has walked down—with armed police—and if we are to maintain our model of policing with consent, what does that consent really feel and look like? And how can we accelerate this process? It will take a lot more than good will and fine rhetoric. It will take some serious, positive action to get a move on with the kind of numbers that we now need if we are to protect the integrity of a police force that does not routinely carry guns.

David T. C. Davies: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. It might surprise him to know that a lot of police officers—maybe even the vast majority—would thoroughly agree with him on that point and would desperately like to see black and Asian members of the police force, as I would myself, but some of the responsibility lies not with the police, who have thrown open their arms and said that they want this change, but with leading and influential members of the black community in parts of London. We need to encourage them to go out and say, "The police force would welcome your application and it really wants you to join," because that is the reality. The police feel that they are not getting support from those influential members of the black community. I hope that we will get it soon.

Mr Lammy: This debate is rather circular, because the hon. Gentleman will understand that the kind of summer that we have had and the run-up to it have not done a great deal to encourage the very young people I need to join the police force to go out and do so. Nevertheless, I lay bare the scale of the problem.

Many of us here today will have landed in cities in America, looked at the police force and the local community, and thought, "Wow! I wish we had that here!" If it can be done on the streets of New York, it can be done here. That is what we need to learn from Bill Bratton, who has come to town. The same thing must be done here or I am afraid that our whole policing model will become very hard to maintain.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I agree entirely with the point that the right hon. Gentleman is making. However, in relation to New York, does he know whether there is evidence that the better representation of black and minority ethnic communities, for instance in the police force, automatically leads to more effective policing by consent?

Mr Lammy: Of course, serious issues remain for all police forces, particularly those policing urban areas, but at the heart of the discussion, as other hon. Members have said, is trust. I was a very young man and lawyer when the first round of debate about stop and search happened, and here we are—25 years later—still having that same debate. When will we put it to one side?

Let us look at the figures. Young black people are stopped and searched at seven times the rate of young white people, and some are stopped at 27 times the rate of young white people, particularly where there is a section 60 order in place. There is a section 60 order in place in my constituency. That issue is very real. I am not suggesting that we should abandon stop and search. It seems to me that those who argue for the abandonment of stop and search need to stop and think. The No. 1 issue that young people are raising in London is knife crime, and against that backdrop of course we must have stop and search. It is patently obvious that to keep young people feeling safe on their way to and from school, we must stop and search, but we must do it intelligently and with a police force that the broader community trusts. That is why the figures that I have cited in relation to the ethnic minority profile of the police are so crucial.

In addition, I am hugely critical of the decision effectively to downgrade stop and account, and stop and search. I still believe that when a police officer stops and searches someone, they should put down the name of the person that they stopped and they should certainly put down whether there has been any injury or damage as a consequence. I sat on the delegated legislation Committee dealing with the changes to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 code and stop and search, and I listened to the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice make arguments about bureaucracy, but I say to the Government that those are precisely the issues that undercut trust in the fact that stop and search can be done intelligently. That is leading to real antagonism among young men, particularly young black men in London.

I have been stopped and searched. I was stopped and searched during the last general election.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Wasn't your rosette a giveaway? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lammy: I was not wearing my rosette on that occasion; I had taken it off. I was stopped and searched. I was not happy about it, but I understood. Obviously, I opened my mouth to speak, although I did not say who I was because I wanted to see how it would pan out, and it was okay.

Stop and search is a reality of communities such as mine, but it must be done with trust. I am also concerned about the officers who are doing it. If we are to have a Met, I want young people—I do not care what their colour is, actually—who have grown up on the streets of Hackney, Peckham, Camberwell, Tottenham and Kensal Rise in our police force. I do not want a police force that effectively consists of young men and women who have grown up anywhere but in London. I must say that too many officers come from far-flung areas, which means that the relationship-building process with communities is problematic.

Gavin Barwell: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that what is wrong is not the policy per se, but a lack of empathy and understanding on the part of young people of what it is like to be a police officer and to have to

[Gavin Barwell]

approach a group of young people and stop them? More importantly, as he says, there is a lack of understanding among police officers who are not local to a community about what it is like to be someone who is stopped every time they go out at the weekend and to see a lack of respect in the way that that is done? The problem is not the policy per se, but the way it is being applied.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman puts his point well. In a civilised country, a burden always lies on the majority, and some of what we say in such a country relates to how the minority are treated. I have met young men—good young men—at university. I asked two young men who run the youth group at my local church whether they had been stopped and searched. One had had a good experience; the other had had several experiences that were not so good and had left him embarrassed and demoralised in relation to his local community. The differentiation that one needs to make in a complex, multi-layered, multicultural, multiracial London of subcultures takes local knowledge and understanding, and we need to face up to that truth.

There are questions about why the rioting took place on the scale that it did, against the backdrop of 460 people having died as a result of police contact since the IPCC was set up and not one police officer having been convicted. I ask hon. Members to think about those statistics and about why a community such as mine finds it extraordinary that, following Mark Duggan's death in August, measures were not put in place to anticipate the worst, given current levels of unemployment and the fact that too many young people were out on the streets with nothing to do.

It is important that I qualify my use of "young people". When I speak to my secondary schools, not one of their young people has been arrested, and when I look at the profile of arrests, there is a tiny proportion of under-18s.

When someone gets well into their 20s, I believe that they account for their own behaviour, so the caricaturing of young people that I saw this summer and some of rhetoric about race made me deeply ashamed to be part of this country. It was so sad to see us slip back to the sort of discourse we saw in the 1980s. I was disappointed that major national shows such as "Newsnight" could get their presentation of the issues so badly wrong. Let me say in this House to David Starkey, "How do I sound? I sound English because I am English, thank you very much." For one of our historians to be allowed to question me in the way that he did was a disgrace, and it undermines the importance of the debate and the 20,000 young people sitting at home in my constituency, wanting to do what is best, but worried and anxious about what is going on. It is for those young people that I hope we all play our part in properly regenerating Tottenham, ensuring that there are opportunities and a growth strategy. We cannot have a constituency with the highest unemployment in London left to sink when bankers and others are bailed out.

Katy Clark (in the Chair): The previous Chair asked Members to keep their contributions brief. The Member who has just spoken took more than 30 minutes, so I, too, ask Members to speak for a shorter time.

4.13 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I will endeavour to follow your strictures, Ms Clark.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) on securing this important debate, and I want to say that it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who so effectively articulates his community's frustrations about what happened there.

I wish to use this opportunity to again express my condolences to all those who lost loved ones in the rioting. The rioters' behaviour was unacceptable and without justification, much of it driven by gratification, or greed—the right hon. Member for Tottenham said that he saw smiling faces during the events. Much of the rioting was conducted with total disregard for people's safety. I had the chance to visit Croydon shortly afterwards, and the arsonists there clearly had no regard whatever for the people living above the shops to which they chose to set fire. They had absolutely no idea whether people were in the flats, and I hope that they are severely dealt with.

I commend the performance of individual officers and of the emergency services generally. I am sure that Members will have received briefings from a range of organisations. The Local Government Association briefing refers to the London fire brigade's receiving nearly 2,200 calls from the Monday to the Tuesday of the riots, which was about 15 times its usual rate. The fire brigade had to attend fires in many places around London; the clear intention of the arsonists was to draw the brigade in, with the police to back it up, so that they could then move on to commit their crimes elsewhere.

I commend also the work of local authorities, many of which responded immediately and were able to clear up the damage to such an extent that people walking through the streets the following morning were not so aware of what happened the night before and, finally, I commend my local police. My borough commander, who is about one year from retirement, never expected to be leading a baton charge down Sutton's High street. He effectively dispelled those who intended to cause trouble in our town centre.

Many aspects of what happened rightly need to be subjected to scrutiny. The right hon. Member for Tottenham mentioned the initial incident involving Mark Duggan and its handling by the Metropolitan Police Service and the IPCC. I do not think that it would be appropriate for me to say more about that incident because it is under investigation, but one aspect of it that distresses me is that there does not seem to have been a great appreciation of the history in Tottenham. That history seems to have escaped many of the parties that one would have thought would have been aware of it and more sensitive to the need to deal with the matter very carefully.

The availability of officers with level 2 public order training needs to be looked into. In London, just four groups of 18 officers are trained to deal with this type of incident. The Met also needs to look at scenario planning. It was clear that the service was not set up to deal with this number of incidents, or with this scale of disturbance. I am sure that lessons will be learnt about how it can ramp up the number of officers much more quickly. I say that with the benefit of hindsight. I do not think that the Met or anyone else could have anticipated what would happen on that first night and in the days that followed.

There are also lessons to be learnt about gangs. Perhaps I was guilty at the beginning of saying that there was heavy gang involvement; the figures suggest that it was only 13%. Perhaps the G8 anarchists were the main instigators, but we will find that out only later. Perhaps they were involved in, or responsible for, the most serious violence.

I welcome the Government response as it stands, with the £20 million allocated by the Department for Communities and Local Government to help recovery and regeneration. I know, having seen the impact in Croydon and reflected on how many different parties will have to agree to work together quickly and effectively, including the local authorities, the insurance companies and businesses affected, that great commitment and co-operation will be required. If that work does not happen quickly, some people will walk away from their businesses, particularly those who have costs. I was talking to a dry cleaner who said that £70,000 was needed simply to buy the equipment again, so swift action is needed.

On the criminal justice response, I have written to the Secretary of State for Justice to see what lessons were learnt about how the courts responded. They responded quickly, but there have been concerns that they did not get the information they needed, such as probation reports. Was that the case? There may be lessons to be learnt about courts operating overnight, although, as I understand it, magistrates who are volunteers may not be enthusiastic about the prospect of working through the night as a matter of course.

On the criminal justice response, as I have stated already, serious crimes were committed and they will receive serious sentences. The riots were an aggravating factor but, in my view, some of the sentences were still disproportionate. Members will know the case of Ursula Nevin, a mother of two children, who was sentenced to five months in prison for handling stolen goods, although she was not personally involved in the riots. The appeal judge in that case clearly felt that the sentence was disproportionate, the aggravating factor of the riots notwithstanding. One consequence, according to UNICEF, is that the child prison population has risen by 8% since the riots, which is of concern to us all. Of those charged, 65% were remanded in custody, whereas normally only about 10% are.

An opportunity was missed to use restorative justice as part of the rehabilitation revolution. It would have been an appropriate response to force low-level offenders to sit down with victims, if the victims wanted it, in order to apologise and make reparations for what they did. Restorative justice is effective. Home Office research shows that it leads to a 14% reduction in reoffending, which we all want. It could also have been an opportunity for intensive community sentences. Projects were set up under the previous Government, and I hope that they will be evaluated, as I believe that they will prove at least 10% more effective than short-term prison sentences in reducing reoffending. Again, if we are serious about reducing reoffending and reducing the number of victims in the longer term, we must consider such measures.

On restorative justice and community sentences, in the words of the chief inspector of prisons, it stands to reason that someone paying back to the community on a supervised scheme, and someone who has to pay bills and behave responsibly, is more likely to go straight than someone locked up and sleeping through their sentence. The Government intend, rightly, to ensure that prisoners cannot sleep through their sentence and are encouraging work in prisons, but that is a long-term ambition on which we are working.

On the local authority response, I thought that today's debate would involve a stronger push for eviction of tenants and withdrawal of benefits. Some speakers, particularly one speaker who may come after me, may push that agenda, but we will see. On the eviction of tenants, the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) rightly pointed out that some anomalies will be involved. One anomaly that he did not mention is that, if a private owner-occupier was involved in the riots, they cannot be evicted from their property, so distinguishing between tenants and private owners is a challenge. Also, there are problems associated with evicting tenants for offences committed in their area but not tenants who committed offences in other areas.

Mr Mark Field: I suspect that most of that would fall foul of human rights legislation, which will not be removed from the statute book any time soon. However, there is a fundamental distinction between a private tenant and a tenant of a local authority, in terms of the responsibility that a local authority has to act on behalf of all local residents. Although I accept the grave concerns expressed by the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford), do they not see that the community out there feel strongly that lessons must be learnt? If we do not use a range of different tools to make it clear how much the incidents have distressed the community, the perpetrators will be seen to have got away with it.

Tom Brake: I agree that the community wants to see lessons learnt and appropriate action taken. At the same time, I hope that the community feels that it was disproportionate for Wandsworth council, for instance, to proceed with the eviction of an 18-year-old—I will not mention his name, because I do not feel it appropriate—his mother and eight-year-old sister from their home in Battersea. That was a disproportionate response to the sins of the 18-year-old, who said:

> "It's not that I regret anything"—

personally, I think that he should regret a lot—

> "but I am appalled that they've put"

his mother

> "in this position because of me. She has nothing to do with this. These are the consequences of my actions, not hers."

I agree entirely with the latter half of that quote.

Gavin Barwell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Brake: I will give way once more, and then I must conclude.

Gavin Barwell: I do not wholly disagree with the point that the right hon. Gentleman is making, but if that 18-year-old repeatedly behaved antisocially in the area where he lived, surely the tenancy agreement into which his parent entered would state that that could be

[Gavin Barwell]

grounds for eviction? Ignoring the whole business of the riots, when one person in a family continually behaves in an antisocial fashion, that is clearly legitimate grounds for removing that family from their tenancy. On involvement in the riots, the key point, as I hope all Members can agree, is proportionality and whether the involvement was in the locality. If both those tests are met, that is reasonable grounds.

Tom Brake: It is about proportionality. We must all decide where the line in the sand must be drawn, but I add that the rest of the family were apparently involved in the local church and in volunteer groups. We all know from personal experience that sometimes it is necessary to take action against whole, dysfunctional families, but equally, in some families, one individual is completely out of control while the remainder of the family do their best to ensure that that individual does not act in that way.

We discussed youth services at some length during the debate earlier this week on gangs. The Government have a responsibility. Undoubtedly, we have decided to reduce budgets for local authorities, but equally, local authorities cannot hide behind that entirely when it comes to some of the decisions taken to withdraw excessively large percentages, or indeed all, of the funding available for youth services. Local authorities can exercise some degree of prioritisation, although I acknowledge that they must do so within a more restricted funding envelope.

It is also important for Government to ensure that the justice system treats children differently. It is important, even if we abolish the Youth Justice Board, that the justice system should still recognise that children are different and should be treated differently.

Katy Clark (in the Chair): I will call for the winding-up speeches to begin at 5.15.

4.28 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is the first time that I have spoken under your chairmanship, Ms Clark. Welcome to the Chair.

We have had an interesting debate. I intend to be brief, so I will skip over some of my comments rather than repeat the contributions of others. I echo other Members in supporting the comments made by the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), particularly about not demonising young people. I found it hard to disagree with nearly everything that he said, but I am angry that the Secretary of State for Justice has spoken about feral children and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has spoken about ghettoes. That is a slur on my constituency and many others, and on many of my friends and neighbours and the friends of my children. I hope that the measured comments made by the hon. Member for Croydon Central and most colleagues here are more reflective of the reality of the Government's thinking than the knee-jerk reactions to media headlines.

We need to be aware of stereotypes. The pictures and the arrest record—I have seen the pictures myself, as have other Members—show that a number of older people wearing work clothes were involved in looting. There is still work to be done. We are analysing the figures in Hackney to see exactly who was involved—the figure keeps changing, so I will not quote anything now. CCTV has been instrumental in solving this, and I am pleased to hear a strong feeling from all parties in the House that CCTV is here to stay and has a role to play. When people talk about civil liberties, I simply ask whose civil liberties they mean. My constituents want more, not less.

The majority of those involved in Hackney—on Clarence road and the Narrow way, which is in the heart of my constituency and was at the heart of the troubles—were over 18 years old. About 16 businesses were very badly damaged. We were very fortunate that we did not suffer the same problems as Croydon and Tottenham. That was largely down to the very good work of the fire service, which sat in our excellent CCTV centre and ensured that any dangerous fires were dealt with quickly and that others were allowed to burn out. That was really important and shows that, with good co-operation across the emergency services, some of the worst aspects that hit other places can sometimes be prevented.

I agree that race has been subject to an unfortunate stereotype. I echo the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). The comments of illustrious academics and the way in which they were made on "Newsnight" were very unhelpful, have caused great ill feeling in my constituency, and do not reflect the general people whom I represent, whatever their colour or background.

I know that the Minister does not represent the Home Office, but he is a representative of Her Majesty's Government, so I point out to him that they need to look at the issue of police numbers. Surely it is time to rethink. We had issues about the number of police available in Hackney on the night of 8 August. They were able to hold a line but no more. The fact that it took two to arrest people meant that it was impossible to do the arrests while maintaining the line and preventing further damage and looting to property in my borough. That meant that people such as Siva Khandian, a shopkeeper whom many will have seen pictured in newspapers, had his shop completely ransacked and looted. Others suffered similarly. Residents in Clapton square were scared stiff because cars were burning outside their homes. I do not blame the police, but it meant that there were real challenges. If this is a time for cross-party consensus, we should pause for thought and look at the numbers of police available in London. I join the Mayor of London, with whom I agree on this occasion, in saying that we need seriously to make sure that we have the policing numbers available to tackle such problems and, crucially, to deal with our ongoing community issues.

I want to touch on the issue of stop and search. I do not have time to develop my arguments, because many other Members wish to speak. My right hon. Friend raised some interesting points. I, too, am not against stop and search, but I think that attitude is an issue—the attitude of the police, in terms of courtesy and respect as they carry out a stop and search, as well as the attitude of those who are stopped and searched. I hear strong views from young people and their parents, who feel aggrieved that their children and they themselves are stopped frequently. There are also young people who tell me, "I'm glad that I was stopped, because I know that a person carrying a knife or a gun will also be stopped." In Hackney, when there have been serious complaints about officers and they have been identified, some have been dismissed from the service of the Metropolitan police because of their attitude during stop and search. The Metropolitan police need to publicise that more. I urge the Minister to take that back to his colleagues at the Home Office, because parents and young people come to me so often to raise their concerns and it is difficult to pinpoint what action to take. I am not pinpointing individuals—I am sure that there are confidentiality issues—but it is important to say that the police have standards and where they have the evidence they will act and remove bad apples from the cart.

It is also important that the community makes complaints that are specific and not generalisations. I am sure that many Members have attended meetings in which people rail against the police in general terms. When I and others, including police officers who are present, ask them for specifics, they respond with nothing. As a Member of Parliament, I need those specifics—I am happy to be a third-party reporting body and pass them on, and I do when I get them—but I rarely get them. They are important.

We are short of time, so I will ask some particulars of the Minister. The Riots Communities and Victims Panel is visiting a number of areas in which riots took place, but, as I understand it, Darra Singh and his team do not, at present, intend to visit Hackney. Why is that? I do not necessarily expect an answer, but will the Minister at least write to me to explain why that is the case? We could then look at getting Darra Singh and his team to visit, which would be helpful, because I think there are lessons that we can pass on to other areas.

The Home Office has agreed to meet me, as the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch. I am concerned that, due to personnel changes in the ministerial team, that agreement has slipped. The Government report on this issue and gangs in particular is due out at the end of this month, but we are already halfway through it. I hope that the Minister will take that concern back to his Home Office colleagues.

Has a Communities and Local Government Minister met with key groups in Hackney that are doing interesting work? The trading places scheme is funded by the council through the Crib youth group, led ably by Janette Collins and her colleagues. It gets young people to trade places with key professionals, including police officers, to do exactly what I think the hon. Member for Croydon Central suggested—getting people to understand each other's points of view. That is proving successful and lessons could be learned for other areas. It is important that it is looked at and replicated, if necessary.

On evictions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) talked about knee-jerk reactions, about which we must be wary. Evicting people because of riot involvement sounds easy, but we need to beware the law of unintended consequences. Let me be clear: those involved in these riots deserve punishment. My constituents are clear about that, too. However, at two recent Clapton conferences in my constituency Hackney residents demonstrated a real understanding of the complexities of the situation. They were talking about wider issues than the riots alone, but they recognised that, in some cases, antisocial behaviour, particularly by the youngest, is a result of chaotic family backgrounds and situations. Under the proposals that some have made, those differences would not be highlighted and people could be evicted and more problems created as a result. Where do these people go? Will they be put into the private sector, unable to pay and keep up with rent? What would that do to other members of the household?

Hackney council supports the same tough approach as I do to crime and antisocial behaviour. Prior to the events of 8 August, it had already begun a wider review of tenancy agreements that included possible changes to conditions relating to antisocial behaviour, gang activity, domestic violence and irresponsible dog ownership. The council is also discussing similar proposals with other large landlords in Hackney. The issue, however, is more legally challenging than it is made out to be. I do not have time to go into that, but a legal definition of "locality," for instance, limits what can be done. I am all for eviction, where necessary, under the current tenancy agreement, but to say that people should be evicted just because of the riots is an issue that needs to be addressed. Issues relating to home owners versus tenants are also important. We all also need to bear in mind the many intergenerational households in my constituency and elsewhere as a result of the shortage of family homes. That could mean three generations of a family being put out with nowhere to go.

In a debate yesterday, I talked about the impact on young people of the cuts to education maintenance allowance and so on, so I will not go into that, but it is worth highlighting some good news stories and how the community rallied around. Residents raised more than £20,000 for Siva Khandian, who owned the convenience store in Clarence road that he saw his neighbours looting. Street sweepers worked through the night, clearing up as the riots continued around them. Council officers put in extra unpaid hours, to support businesses in particular. Police slept in the corridors of the police station, because it was not worth their while to go home—they wanted to be there and cancelled their leave. Residents came to clean up the next day. Residents and businesses joined forces for a street party in Clarence road on 15 August. Jamie Cowen, the managing director of Your Square Mile, contacted me and said that he has some money that he wants to make sure goes to the riot-affected areas. People across the board—I have named only a few—have made a big difference.

I do not have time to go into the issues surrounding gangs, but I am sure that we will have time to debate them again. I emphasise to the Minister that we have good experience of what integrated gang intervention can do. Gang violence dropped by 59% in six months after our joint multi-agency gang intervention unit, based in Hackney town hall, was formed. There are some lessons to be learned there. Early intervention is vital. Important youth work is taking place with younger children from the age of eight onwards. In the schools that I visit, there is a real issue with eight and nine-year-olds getting hooked into gang culture. A small number of people are involved in gangs, but the wider fear is my big concern—the parents who take their children out of school and to different areas, and the fact that young people are afraid to walk the streets.

[Meg Hillier]

Of those involved, young people were not in the majority. However, if these events mean that we focus on gangs, the fear of walking down the street and other fears that young people have, some good can come out of the terrible events of that weekend in August.

4.39 pm

Mr Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), I watched the dreadful and, at times, terrifying scenes of disorder that took place in so many of London's shopping centres. My first thoughts were often with the business owners whose livelihoods had been destroyed. Those very hard-working folk are supporting not only families, but our neighbourhoods. They are often the very glue of our local communities and deserve not only our deepest sympathy, but the fast-track help that has been promised by the Government, which I hope they have already received in relation to insurance claims and the like. If there is any problem with that, I hope we will be made aware of it, so that we can collectively do our best on their behalf.

As a father bringing up two young children in central London, I fervently hope that families living in the areas that were directly affected by the riots will not give up on this wonderful city. I love London—not just the historic six square miles that make up my constituency, but the collection of villages that have spawned a whole range of suburbs that most Londoners know only from a cursory glance at the tube map. Those are the districts I love to walk through because their variety and communities never cease to amaze me.

Coincidentally, it was only four days before the riots began that I ambled from the City of London in my constituency through Hoxton and Haggerston and into central Hackney, Clapton, Stamford Hill and Stoke Newington. It was a hot summer's day as I walked down Clarence road. With all its lovely little bistros, that street is very unlike the common perception of Hackney. I walked down Mare street and to the edge of the churchyard of St John's, Clapton. Little did I imagine how, within a few days, the area would turn into a front-line riot zone televised across the UK and the world.

To pick up on one or two other contributions, many of the areas affected by the riots have changed beyond recognition in the 30 years since the race riots of the 1980s. Huge investment has taken place in the public realm and gentrification has progressed apace, while the ethnic and cultural mix has been transformed. I am not naive enough to suggest for one moment that certain parts of the areas that were subject to the riots do not have some deep-seated problems. However, the sense that, for example, Hackney is some sort of lawless ghetto enveloped in hopelessness is well short of the mark, as the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) rightly pointed out.

I am afraid that a lot of what happened was opportunistic criminality. I am slightly concerned not about the idea that the Riot (Damages) Act 1886 should be invoked—of course it should be invoked—but about the idea that the police should get full compensation back. There needs to be an incentive for the police to do their best to maintain law and order, even in some of the most difficult circumstances. If the Metropolitan police were to have full reimbursement of the £300 million concerned, there would not necessarily be an incentive for it to act rapidly if such events occurred in the future. For many people, the most terrifying thing was the sense of utter lawlessness, particularly in areas around Clapham Junction and Lavender Hill. It was interesting that when one heard people being interviewed, there were young yuppies saying, "What the hell is going on?" The whole place had been enveloped by opportunistic criminality.

There is so much more I would have liked to say today. I shall talk a bit about youth violence specifically in my area of Westminster, which thankfully was a part of London that was not particularly badly affected, apart from on a slightly ad hoc basis. The local authority is doing what it can and I want to put some of that work, which I hope will be emulated in other parts of London, on the record.

It is right not to consider the issue to be entirely a youth problem but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Nick de Bois) rightly pointed out, we must consider early intervention. As we know, the Government have pledged to tackle some 120,000 problem families before the next election. We should not necessarily be wholly driven by such targets but, none the less, I hope that that figure will focus minds. Inevitably, local authorities will be at the forefront of local solutions to meet that challenge.

In the last full year, 2010-11, Westminster saw a 49% increase in serious youth violence incidents, rising from 197 to 309 incidents. Already, we have seen 133 incidents for the first few months of this financial year. Under the leadership of the cabinet member for children, young people and community protection, Nickie Aiken, pioneering work is being done on tackling gangs, so that the problem is nipped in the bud. Only 48 hours ago in this Chamber, we had a discussion on that issue. It was rightly pointed out that, for too many young gang members, gangs are a surrogate family because they are often living in very chaotic households, which thankfully are alien to the experience of probably all of us here today. In Westminster, we have developed a "Your Choice" programme, which builds on the principles of early intervention, information sharing and personal responsibility.

Mary Macleod (Brentford and Isleworth) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that family intervention is key to dealing with the matter and that those programmes work because they take in the whole family together, look at the root cause of the problem and try to find a long-term solution?

Mr Field: Very much so. The pure economics of the matter show that if you can reach that small number of families, huge amounts of money can be saved. Otherwise, if we do not reach those families, there are wasted lives that will be put to shame.

The focus of the "Your Choice" programme is on having key transition stages from primary to secondary school. However, it has also developed targeted gang exit programmes, cross-border gang mediation to try to break down the postcode rivalry that lies at the bottom of many of the problems surrounding gang culture in London, and support to get young people into sustained employment and training. We all appreciate how difficult that is, and I fear it will be for some time to come as elements of the economy continue to deteriorate. We also need intensive support to be given to parents and families in the holistic way that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod) described.

We want to try to provide families with a real choice: take the services on offer and become real members of the community, or face a range of enforcement options. That choice is based on evidence of what works, including tried and tested programmes in Westminster, such as the successful gang exit programme. Only 5% of youngsters on that programme received a conviction compared with 42% before the strategy began.

Meg Hillier: Does the hon. Gentleman have any experience of gang injunctions in his constituency? We have had great difficulties getting them to work in Hackney. Has he had any conversations with people in his borough or with other Ministers about them?

Mr Field: We have not had any in my constituency. As I mentioned the other day, one of the issues surrounding the Churchill Gardens estate in my constituency is the worrying sign that we are getting close to a tipping point and that the gang problem will become much more intense than in certain parts of the northern end of the borough, which the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) represents. That is clearly not something I am entirely aware of.

I appreciate that other hon. Members want to speak, so I will just say a couple more things. It is important to recognise that turning around the lives of what are regarded as problem young people and families takes time, patience and, inevitably, resources. All too often, local authorities have to rely on one-off funding pots, which often fail to deliver an impact or may deliver that impact only in the very short term, with the problem ultimately reoccurring before too long.

The programme that Westminster is trying to develop requires a sustainable funding stream to ensure that the council can intervene early and support young people to make the right choices in their lives. If we can secure sustainable funding, we will aim to intervene early and support children as young as the age of five through that programme. Westminster city council has secured funds to deliver the bulk of the programme for the current tax year, but it wants to be able to deliver a sustainable programme over three to five years. I have made representations on that and, as I mentioned the other day, I am someone who believes in getting the deficit down and who has tried their level best to recognise that that means not standing up, even at a constituency level, for programmes when cuts are being made. This is probably the only exception. We need to look at the provision of youth services. If we are to have a genuine long-term impact, one of the legacies of trying to ensure that the riots do not happen again must be that we examine those services.

In Westminster—I am sure this is replicated in all London boroughs and, indeed, in boroughs outside the capital represented by hon. Members here today—we have had a substantial reduction of some £828,000 from the funding of our youth services as a result of the emergency Budget in June 2010. That was followed by a further £513,000 reduction in the current tax year. In the light of the rioting, all local authorities will be keener than ever not only to secure money for their programmes but, I hope, to ensure that we can improve the lives of the most vulnerable. As is so often the way in life, the prevention will end up being considerable cheaper in the medium and longer term than the cure that will otherwise be before our eyes.

4.49 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) on securing such an important debate.

As has been widely reported, Ealing was subjected to violent rioting on the Monday night of 8 August and in the early hours of Tuesday 9 August. Ealing Broadway town centre, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Angie Bray), was very badly hit. What is less known and less reported is the fact that West Ealing town centre, shared between the hon. Lady and myself in Ealing, Southall, was also hit very hard by these terrible acts of wanton lawlessness. Related criminal actions also took place in Hanwell and Southall, but to a lesser extent.

Let me place on record my total condemnation of the mindless criminals who ran amok on the normally peaceful streets of Ealing, terrorising innocent bystanders, attacking residents enjoying an evening meal in our many restaurants, threatening shop keepers and their staff, and even threatening residents in their own homes. Their brazen criminality left one man dead, and others are homeless after their homes were burnt down. Dozens of shops and businesses have been seriously damaged, and scores of cars were burned or smashed. It is difficult to find words to condemn strongly enough the actions of this feral minority who literally brought anarchy to the streets of my constituency and those of other hon. Members.

I place on record my thanks to the Ealing borough commander, Andy Rowell, and to his police officers who heroically tried to stem this tide of evil on our streets. Unfortunately, they were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of mainly young adults intent on inflicting this sickening violence on our community. The police were responding to numerous roaming gangs who were clearly using mobile phones and social networking sites to communicate with each other and were thus very mobile, co-ordinated and difficult to pin down and stop.

We have to address the lack of sufficient available public order police as back-up in this situation, and the question of police numbers and resources. In Ealing, 44 officers with riot training and equipment were deployed earlier in the evening to other parts of London. Only a similar number of officers, without training or equipment, were left to try and deal with a mob of more than 200 rioters until reinforcements finally came hours into the riot. In the days that followed, police from all over the country—Cleveland, Sheffield, Berkshire and many other places—patrolled the streets of Ealing to prevent a repeat of the rioting and to provide reassurance to my constituents. It is a sobering thought that the number of 16,000 police officers who were deployed on the streets of London after the riots is the same number of police officers due to be cut. God forbid that we have a

[Mr Virendra Sharma]

reoccurrence of the riots after police numbers have been cut. I urge the Government to halt the current cuts to the Met police in the capital and to the police across the country.

I pay tribute to the emergency services and to Ealing council, which worked throughout the night to provide CCTV pictures for the police to try and track these criminals, and to prepare an emergency response and clean up in the morning. The council, having picked up via Twitter during the night that local residents wanted to take part in the clean-up in the morning, arranged for them to be provided with materials to do so. Hundreds of local residents turned up in the morning to take part and very quickly had both Ealing and West Ealing cleared up. The council had extra street sweepers and refuse collection vehicles on the streets from 5 am and also repaired the roads, which had been damaged by burnt out vehicles, in very quick time. It was a tremendous effort, especially by local residents, who showed the real spirit of community and pulled together in difficult times.

I would like to address a number of issues relating to the aftermath. Obviously, the work to bring the perpetrators to justice is ongoing and I urge my constituents who have any information that would help in this regard to contact the police. Local businesses have provided the police with their CCTV footage and any other evidence that will help to bring about convictions. Ealing council is working closely with the police to use its extensive CCTV footage to bring the full force of the law down on these criminals. It is imperative that all those who committed these outrageous acts are brought to justice and not given the impression that they can get away with wanton law breaking.

On the Tuesday night, all was quiet across Ealing, but there had been warnings that Southall, in my constituency, might come under attack. Having met the police, the local faith, business and community leaders arranged to have volunteers outside places of worship and businesses to protect them. This was a powerful and united community response that received praise from the Prime Minister. However, we all have to make sure that such actions, or other responses by citizens seeking to defend themselves, do not lead to vigilantism. Given the tragic death of the three men in Birmingham who were trying to protect their business, we also need to guard against any inter-racial community tensions. In Southall, all law-abiding religions, races and creeds stood together against the lawless.

Finally, it is vital that as much help as possible is given to local businesses and communities to recover from the impact of these terrible events. In Ealing, the council used a £250 million fund from reserves to provide each affected local independent business with a £1,200 civic disturbance payment, interest-free repayable grants of up to £20,000 for more affected businesses, free weekend parking during September in Ealing and West Ealing, and individual advice to affected businesses through an assigned regeneration officer. One month's business rates relief has also been given to those affected businesses and one week's relief to businesses in the affected areas. There are still issues around claims for loss of business and ongoing levels of insurance premiums that the Government need to help with.

Everything needs to be done to stop a repeat of these disturbing events. I call on the Government to consider the impact of making such large cuts to local council budgets, and the effect that this has had on youth services provision at a time when young people so clearly need support and guidance from the community around them. We must be confident that we can protect our streets should such events occur again. I call on the Government to halt and review the cuts to police numbers and resources. There can be no question that the cuts, as they stand, decimate police numbers and have a significant effect on their ability to deal with events like those we saw in August.

4.58 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I declare an interest as a serving special constable with the British Transport police. Because of the time and my own interest in policing, I want to frame my comments around that.

I congratulate hon. Members on both sides of the House. The debate has been thoughtful and has done away with a lot of the generalisations that were made at the time. For example, I cannot tell the House how much I welcome the fact that nobody has talked about single-parent mothers. If there is one thing that I personally loathe, it is the demonisation of single-parent mothers in generalised fashion. Instead, we have heard, rightly, about the problems of families. We have heard about the issue of absent fathers: it takes two people to create a child, and if one of them is absent it is often the father, so if we are going to demonise anyone let us start with them rather than the mothers. Thank heavens we seem to have moved on from demonising the mothers.

I found the speech of the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) interesting, and I was surprised how much I agreed with much of what he said, although I see things from rather a different perspective: to me, the issue was not a race one at all. In following the riots on the television and, on one night, with a mobile support unit, they did not come over to me as a black issue—it was definitely a black and white issue. I did not notice anything with the Asian community, but perhaps that was a misconception. Certainly I and the police officers I worked with on the Wednesday night, when things had gone quiet, did not see it as a black issue at all, but as very much a problem for black and white communities. In fact, on that Wednesday night, our first response to a 999 call was to do with a group of white extremists—members of the English Defence League or something—in south London. As it happened, on the way to that call, because the Met had already taken over, we were diverted to deal with black youths in Lewisham. Perhaps that is my misconception though: I did not notice it in the press, but the right hon. Gentleman did, so I must take that on board.

The right hon. Gentleman made an important comment about getting more black and Asian people into the police force. I served for a while in Stockwell and have policed in Brixton. I was not comfortable with the fact that, often, the only police officers on duty were white, but a lot of police officers felt the same way. If we asked, the vast majority of police officers would answer that they really wanted black and Asian people to join the police—they really want the police to be representative because it makes their lives easier. I have spoken to black and Asian people—I spoke about this recently to a DJ who I imagine is quite influential—who say that they still do not trust the police. I gained an impression a little from the right hon. Gentleman that he felt the same way. May I just say this? In any organisation consisting of thousands of people, one will find some idiots—there is no doubt about it—but the vast majority of police officers are not racist and do not judge people by the colour of their skin.

Furthermore, in any station, police officers do not want to get into a situation in which half of them are sitting on one side and half on the other, whether because of skin colour, religion or something else. That is not a good idea for a police officer. If police officers have to press the orange "help urgently required" button, they do not want to think that half the other officers will not come because of things they have said or done in the police canteen earlier. Believe me, and I think that I speak for most officers, when I am in the police canteen I want all those officers to be my friend because I want to feel that they will come for me if I need their help, and vice versa. There is not as big an issue as perhaps there was 20 years, and I urge anyone in the black and Asian community, and in particular in the Black Police Association which had a policy of actively discouraging black and Asian people from joining the police, please, to get behind the police. If there are problems, black and Asian people can change them by joining the police and being part of the police service—it would help us all very much if that happened.

Various speakers have talked about stop and search. I have stopped and searched a lot of people over the past five or six years. It is embarrassing to stop and search people if they are not found with anything. I have always attempted to do stops and searches with as much courtesy as possible, and in an apologetic way, but there may be officers who have failed to do that, which is highly regrettable. They are making their jobs and those of their colleagues much harder if they fail to stop and search people courteously. I find it hard to believe comments by the right hon. Member for Tottenham that officers are no longer obliged to note down if someone gets injured in a stop and search. As well as a stop-and-search form, an officer is expected to fill in his personal notebook, and any officer who failed to put in a personal notebook that someone had received an injury would definitely be in breach of duty. That notebook is inspected by inspectors regularly.

Getting rid of stop and account was a good thing because, frankly, if someone came up to me and asked for the time and I answered them, technically they could demand a stop-and-account form, which led to all sorts of spurious cases in which officers were filling out long forms because people were trying to waste their time. There is no reason why police officers should not be able to go up and speak to someone. I agree, if they are going to undertake a search of any sort, that there ought to be some record, and there still is.

One of the great problems, however, is that it is quite difficult to stop and search people outside section 60 or section 44 areas. I can think of numerous instances, such as one in Liverpool street when I stopped someone for committing an offence for which I would not expect to carry out an arrest—begging, in this particular case. I then did a police national computer check and the person had a long record of carrying knives, violence and drugs. Under the circumstances, a quick stop and search might seem quite reasonable—not a strip search or an invasive search but an airport-style pat down of the people in question, just to check that at that moment they did not have a knife or drugs on them. Police officers, however, are not allowed to do so and, because of that, many people are walking around London with knives and guns because they know that it is actually difficult outside section 60 or section 44 areas for the police to stop them. The first time I was able to carry out a search—I will not go into the details, but the set of circumstances allowing me to do it were strange—I found a handgun on the 16-year-old involved, which made me think that there must be a lot of other 16-year-olds walking around with handguns who were pretty safe from being caught.

There has been some mention of tactics. One of the criticisms of the police has been that they did not get involved—when the car was on fire or whatever—at an early enough stage in the proceedings. Again, I look at it from the police officer's point of view. They feel the pressure from politicians in rooms such as this. We have seen a number of riots over the past few years, and outbreaks of mass disturbance. After some riots, we have seen police officers criticised for their use of force. When people talk about robust policing, let us not mince our words: what we are talking about, at the extreme, is the police officers rapping their batons and walking forwards in an aggressive and forceful fashion. That is how they are trained to do it; they are trained to look forceful because at the moment that the baton comes out nothing less than an aggressive approach will work and remove people. The problem with that is that, as the police officers are walking forwards, they have their batons up and are getting ready to strike, and that is the photograph that will appear in the Sunday papers the next morning: the great British bobby looking out aggressively, probably shouting, and with a large metal baton ready to strike someone. The police officers might actually be quite scared as they are doing it; they do not really want to be in that position and they do not want to strike anyone but, once they are in that position, they do not really have much choice other than to go forwards. Yet, opening up the Sunday papers the next day, members of the public in suburbia and Members of Parliament see the picture and say, "This is an outrage! How dare the British police officer go for them! Look at how aggressive they were!" The police are trained to be aggressive: we spend two days a year training to look aggressive, because we hope that the aggression will put a person off and get them to move backwards. But no one sees that, just the photograph. Police officers therefore come under incredible criticism.

After one of the riots, a police officer was prosecuted for obeying exactly the instructions that we are all given: tell people to get back, if they do not go back, push them back, if they still keep coming forward, strike them with a baton. It does not matter whether the person in front is a large male or a small female—believe me, a lot of police officers have been assaulted by small females, and we are not trained to make that differentiation. If at all possible, we will protect ourselves from anyone, and rightly so.

Tom Brake: Is the hon. Gentleman at all reassured that, in relation to the policing of the riots, I am not aware of anyone having made any complaints about how they were handled?

David T. C. Davies: We will wait and see what happens.

I want to make the point that the use of force in that way is a necessary option for the police, and one for which they have been criticised. The police then moved on to use what the press call kettling—the police call it something else—in which, basically, they keep a line and keep everyone within that line. They have been criticised for that, by Members—

Malcolm Wicks (Croydon North) (Lab): Some of us want to talk about the riots.

David T. C. Davies: If the right hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will wait until the Chair has a problem. I am answering remarks made earlier on.

Police have been criticised for kettling, and the point I am making—this is why it is relevant to the riots—is that the criticisms of the police that they stood back and did nothing are totally unfair because Members of this House, in all parts, have in the past criticised police for using tactics that would have dealt with those riots in the first place.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham also spoke about specialist police forces coming into an area from outside. With the sorts of operations to which he referred, such as firearms units, the police officers would necessarily have to come in from outside, because of the level of training required to carry out such operations. I think it would be unwise to try to pass judgment on such a matter before a full report has taken place.

I congratulate hon. Members on the way in which they have addressed the matter. If I were them, however, I would think carefully about making general criticisms of the police without a full understanding of the pressures that they are under. I hope that all hon. Members in the House will do their best to encourage their communities, particularly black and Asian communities, to persuade their members to join the police, hopefully to ensure that such riots do not happen again.

Katy Clark (in the Chair): Order. The wind-ups will start at 5.15.

5.10 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The riots happened because they could, and there is a real issue about how the police handled London on those few nights. There were simply not enough police officers available, and there seemed to be little direction from the centre. I am sure that all the borough services did what they could, but there seemed to be no overarching direction on how to deal with anything.

By 3 o'clock in my constituency, everyone knew what was going to happen. We had phone calls to our offices, the police knew, we knew about the BlackBerry messages, and some of the young people who were demonised turned up at Mitcham police station asking the police to look at their BlackBerries to ensure that everyone knew what was going to happen. However, unfortunately Croydon went up first. Understandably, the officers at Mitcham went to Croydon. It was rather like young boys learning to play football. There are 22 players on the pitch, and when the ball goes to one end, all 22 follow. That is precisely what happened.

I say that not to criticise anyone in particular, because what has happened has happened, but to provide a tool for the future. We have a new regime at New Scotland Yard, and I hope that it will learn. There is an issue about shift patterns, and availability at weekends and in the evenings, which must be addressed. My police force, under Mr Wolfenden whom I regularly criticise, deserves no criticism at this point, but I want to share a story that is symptomatic of what happened in my constituency and, I am sure, in all the constituencies represented by hon. Members here today.

The police went back to Wimbledon police station because they had no riot-trained officers, who, understandably, were in Croydon. They got together what bits of old kit they had to make up protective gear. They went out of Wimbledon police station, but they did not have a bus or a car to travel in, because they were all somewhere else, so the police marched the 2.5 miles from Wimbledon police station to the Tandem leisure centre. When they got there, there was nothing they could do because there were so many people rioting and looting because they could, and because the police were not there to defend anyone. The consequence was that people were frightened.

I have underestimated the fear felt by residents who were not involved. People were worried that rioters would march up their street and set their house on fire. Elderly people could hear the noise, but did not know what they would do if people came towards them. The mums and dads of young men and women were worried that their sons and daughters would go out and become caught up in the riot. The fear was represented in every community.

We as MPs must deal with that fear, build relationships with the community, and work in our communities. If I had the opportunity, I would tell people, whatever their party, that the consultation on individual electoral registration closes tomorrow, so they should look at the document, and say what they think about it. If we lose young people in London from our electoral register because of those judgments, our position will become much worse.

5.14 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I want to make four brief points. First, I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Enfield North (Nick de Bois), who referred to the importance of elected representatives reflecting on some of the things that have been said, whether descriptions of feral underclasses—I completely disagree with that—or some of the things that we may have said. Some of us were raw at the time—I was a victim in the riots—but we all have a huge responsibility to think carefully about the words that were used, and to challenge when appropriate. At a meeting in my constituency, young people said that it is fine to burn Argos because local people do not run it. No, it is not fine to set Argos alight. Local people are employed there, and some people were very frightened.

Secondly, I agree with much of what has been said about the police. We must think about numbers, the ability of the police to surge numbers when necessary, police tactics, and how many people are trained to deal with riots. Thirdly, on the criminal justice system, I believe that in August it was necessary to send a clear message that people would not get away with rioting. Some of the sentences that have been dished out have been disproportionate, but we must not forget that it was necessary to send out a clear message at the time.

Fourthly, on the wider Government response, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is entirely right to talk about the need for the Government to think about regenerating some of the communities where the rioting took place. The riots did not take place in Witney or Tunbridge Wells; they took place in areas of significant deprivation where there is high unemployment. We need to put the matter right, and the Government must come up with a policy that addresses some of those fundamental issues.

5.16 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure, Ms Clark, to serve under your chairmanship for the first time. This has been an excellent debate, and largely consensual. I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) on securing it, and on his measured speech. He set the tone for those who spoke after him.

Everyone in the Chamber and throughout the country was shocked and appalled by the scenes that they witnessed on the streets of our towns and cities in August. The Leader of the Opposition has made our position extremely clear. He said that nothing can excuse or justify the acts of violence that we witnessed in those terrible days a couple of months ago. It is right that people who engaged in riotous behaviour should face the full consequences of their actions, and that has been reflected in the contributions today.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) made an important point. He said that it is clear that there were complex reasons behind the riots, so it is important not to look for a quick fix and easy answers to what happened. It is important to examine those complex reasons in full detail, so that we understand why the terrible scenes occurred. He also stressed the importance of CCTV. There is a debate at the moment about its use, and whether it is valuable or should be reduced. He made the point extremely well that it has been invaluable in bringing to justice some of the people who were involved in the riots earlier this year.

The hon. Member for Enfield North (Nick de Bois) highlighted the spirit of his constituents, and that was reflected in all towns and cities that were affected. We saw the best and the worst of human behaviour. I was pleased to hear him say that his opinion had shifted since his early response, and I welcome his support for early intervention. He also stressed the need to understand what went on, and to get to the bottom of it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) made a passionate speech, and stressed the importance of people, whatever their community or background, understanding the difference between right and wrong. I totally agree. He also stressed the importance of neighbourhood and community policing, and said that something had clearly gone wrong with community policing in his constituency. That is regrettable, and there is a real need to re-establish trust in the police. It is essential to take that forward.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) commended the work of local authorities. Local authorities come in for a lot of criticism and receive a lot of brickbats, but their clean-up operations and responses were magnificent. I welcome his recognition of that, which was important to get on the record. I also share his view about the need for proportionate sentencing. Yes, people need to face the consequences of their actions, but the sentences must be proportionate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) stressed the importance of avoiding stigmatising entire groups—another important point with which I agree. She said that we must emphasise the need for respect, both within the community and for agencies that work on our behalf, including the police. She said that we should avoid a knee-jerk response, and highlighted the fantastic attitude in her constituency from the community, the general public, council workers and the police, who all responded magnificently. I welcome her putting those comments on the record.

The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr Field) highlighted the opportunistic nature of much of the criminality in which people indulged, and he referred to the need to look at early intervention. He pointed out that local authorities will be at the forefront in dealing with the consequences of the riots and in finding solutions to prevent them from happening again. He stressed the importance of a sustainable funding stream. Investing in prevention is more cost-effective and far better than dealing with problems after they have happened.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) spoke about the impact of the riots on his constituency and stressed his concerns about inadequate police numbers. He mentioned the difficulties the police had in responding to the problems and riotous behaviour until more police were deployed from outside London to bring some order to the streets. He was worried about the reductions in police numbers, and called on the Government to rethink their proposed cuts to the number of police.

The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) made a point about the use of language and said how important it is to avoid demonising single parents. I agree with him; that point was absolutely spot on. He reinforced the call from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham for more black and Asian recruits to the police force, which will help to ensure a more sustainable and measured response. The hon. Gentleman also spoke from his own personal experience about the difficulties of policing, particularly the practical difficulties of more robust policing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) also spoke about inadequate police numbers and the need to learn lessons about deployment. She noted how police were deployed in Croydon, which meant that it was difficult to deal with the outbreak of rioting in her own area, and she stressed the fear and anxiety felt by her community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) spoke about the importance of being careful with the language that we use. We must be cognisant of police numbers and the tactics that were used. We all agree that it was important to send the strong message that people cannot get away with riotous behaviour. It is vital to regenerate those communities

[Chris Williamson]

affected by the riots but, as hon. Members have pointed out, those areas that were not afflicted still have some of the underlying problems of the communities that were affected. We must be aware of that and ensure a measured response across the country.

It is important to look at how we can prevent a repetition of what happened in August and the appointment of Louise Casey to the troubled families unit is a welcome step in the right direction. I know of her work and have met her. She is a tremendous public servant and will do an excellent job in driving the agenda forward. We must also understand why such events happened, which will help to prevent a repetition.

As hon. Members have said, last month, we saw the best and worst facets of human behaviour. I believe that we must find a way of instilling a sense of civic pride in our communities and particularly our young people. It is difficult to understand how people can feel that it is acceptable under certain circumstances to smash up their own communities. If we can instil that sense of civic pride and hope, and give people a stake in their community, we will go a long way towards preventing a repetition of the awful scenes that we saw in August.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has picked up on an important point that I would have liked to mention in my earlier comments. It is about the presence of hope and the belief in a positive future, which stopped many people from taking part in the riots. That is one of the key things that we must get right. In some of our inner-city areas, young people, people in their 20s, believe that they have real opportunities.

Chris Williamson: I totally agree; my hon. Friend is spot on. It is essential that we achieve that objective, but the question is: how can it be done? There is a significant role for the youth service, and we must give young people hope through providing employment opportunities and adequate training. If we can do that, we will have a chance of instilling that sense of civic pride and hope that is the way forward.

All right hon. and hon. Members will have received a briefing note from the Children's Society. It has made a few observations that are worth putting on the record. On youth services it states:

> "We are concerned that the funding available for youth services has been cut substantially. The Early Intervention Grant, the main grant available for local authorities to provide services for children and young people, has been reduced in real terms by around 23% both this year, and for 2012/13...Market research conducted for The Children's Society in April this year indicated that services for young people will be among the hardest hit with over a quarter of the local authorities responding stating that cuts to youth services were likely, as well as cuts to services for youth crime prevention and support for NEET young people. This is further compounded by the scrapping of the Educational Maintenance Allowance and the Future Jobs Fund. Youth unemployment has already hit record highs over the last year and over a third of 16 and 17-year-old school leavers are currently without a job."

Those are real issues for the Government to look at, and in many ways they were reflected in the contributions from right hon. and hon. Members across the Chamber. I hope that the Government will think again about the way they are reducing funding for local authorities, particularly in key areas such as early intervention and youth services. Will the Minister give the Chamber the benefit of his thoughts on how we can ensure that local authorities commission early intervention services, which are under real threat? How will he prevent funding cuts from impairing local authorities' ability to prevent a repetition of the riots and to respond effectively if there is—we all hope there will not be—another outbreak of riots next year? I ask that because police numbers and firefighter numbers are being reduced, and that will create real pressure if we are not careful. Bearing it in mind that local authorities are seeing reductions in their funding, I would be interested in hearing comments from the Minister on how we can ensure that those reductions will not impair the ability of those public services to respond effectively in the event of an outbreak of riotous behaviour in future.

5.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Robert Neill): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Clark. This has been a very interesting and important debate, and I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell) on securing it and on the very thoughtful, measured and constructive tone he adopted, as did the other hon. Members who spoke. I recognise that not every hon. Member has had the chance to say all that they would wish to, but I will do my best to do justice to the comments that have been made. If I run out of time and do not manage to do so, I will write to hon. Members to deal with any outstanding matters.

As hon. Members said, we are some two months on from the riots and it has rightly been observed that they were on an unprecedented scale. Some 4,700 people had been arrested by the end of September. That compares with 82 arrests after the 1981 riots in Brixton. All of us will have seen shocking scenes, the details of which were relayed by hon. Members today. The whole country has rightly expressed its abhorrence of what happened, and hon. Members are right to do so today.

Some 1,800 businesses were affected during the four or five days of the riots, and 174 residential properties were affected, resulting in 167 households being displaced. Some 16,000 police officers were deployed on the streets of London alone from 9 August. That demonstrates the ability to surge the numbers—an increase of 10,000 officers from the day before.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave a commitment in his statement to the House of Commons that the Government would

> "help you repair the damage, get your businesses back up and running and support your communities."—[*Official Report*, 11 August 2011; Vol. 531, c. 1053.]

I shall tell hon. Members how we are seeking to do that. By working with our partners, we want to help communities and businesses to get back to normal, restore footfall, restore pride in high streets as shopping and leisure areas, and help those most seriously affected.

The day after the Prime Minister's statement, Ministers from the Home Office, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Ministry of Justice and I updated hon. Members on the Government's multi-million pound support package to overcome the immediate recovery issues that those affected were facing. That was followed up with a "one month on" update sent to all English MPs, which was placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Ministers visited hard-hit areas. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government spoke by telephone to the mayor of Hackney. I have had one subsequent meeting with him, and our chief executive has met theirs and they will continue to meet. I was in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford), seeing the businesses affected there. I went to see the 38 affected in my own constituency, in the town centre of Bromley, and like many other hon. Members, I viewed the CCTV footage. An inter-ministerial recovery group, chaired by the Secretary of State, has been set up to support business and community recovery on the ground.

Jonathan Evans: The Minister knows that I mentioned that I chaired the all-party group meeting with leading figures from the insurance industry two days ago. They were concerned that the insurance industry should be involved in the regeneration efforts. That was successfully achieved in Cockermouth, where communities ended up with something better than they started with. That would go some way towards meeting the objective to which the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) referred.

Robert Neill: Yes, the involvement of the business community, including the insurance sector, has been discussed. We are in contact with them, and I am sure that we will be able to take that forward. For example, the quality of shutters that are put up by way of replacement can be an enhancement. That is one thing that has already been very much on the agenda.

Hon. Members have talked about how the riots occurred. I hope that they will forgive me if I do not go into too much detail about that but concentrate on the response. Whatever the circumstances surrounding the death of Mark Duggan, to which the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) referred, and whatever the circumstances that led to that, I think we all agree that what happened later had little to do with it and was fuelled overwhelmingly by greed, deliberate thuggery and opportunistic or sometimes—I have to say, having seen the videos from my area—planned criminality. There is no excuse for that. Sadly, lives were destroyed, along with homes and livelihoods. We have heard about instances of businesses that had been going for years being put out of business. The loss of life—five lives in all—can be fairly connected with that.

It is good to be able to say that a response is already taking place. The fancy dress shop in Battersea that was ruined in the riots is now trading next door to its original building. Duncan Mundell, the proprietor, is opening an additional outlet in the Debenhams store opposite. He is building up his Hallowe'en trade.

Jane Ellison (Battersea) (Con) *rose—*

Robert Neill: I see my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) here. I will certainly give way to her, because she has been instrumental in galvanising her community to try to achieve an holistic response.

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend the Minister is too kind. I am very pleased that he has mentioned the Party Superstore, as I certainly wanted to draw attention to it. It is co-operating with Debenhams, which is a nice example of a small retailer and a big retailer working together. May I use this intervention to make one point and a plea? Wandsworth council has very successfully set up a one-stop shop for local businesses to go to for all the form filling, hand holding and so on. That has worked a treat, particularly for small businesses. It has enabled them to negotiate the minefield of forms and legislation, and is a model for how we should make our response.

My plea concerns the riot funds that the Department for Communities and Local Government controls. We need the deadline to be extended beyond Christmas, so that we can use the run-up to Christmas to let imaginative ideas for using some of that funding to regenerate high streets take root.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is right about the first point; I shall come to the second point in a moment, if I may.

A tribute has already been paid to the emergency services. For reasons of time, I have not repeated it in detail. The strength of it is none the less undiminished. Remarkable bravery and professionalism were shown. In terms of specific Government activities, the DCLG and Business Link have set up web pages providing advice and information. Wandsworth and many other councils have taken the steps that have been referred to.

To look on the positive side, and perhaps to put things in perspective, for every person arrested, 15 people followed the "Riot Clean Up" Twitter feed. There is a good side to this, which we should not forget. We have ensured that the faith communities have been closely involved throughout. Reference has been made to appropriate and condign sentencing. That will continue. It is a matter for the courts, but the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice are also looking at the means of increasing the rate of recovery of fines for those who are not sentenced to custody; I think most people think that right and proper.

The Riot (Damages) Act 1886 is of course an important route for compensation. That has been referred to. We extended the claims deadline from 14 to 42 days. There is a helpline and website linked to a claims bureau at the Home Office to give further advice. Thus far, there have been 775 calls and more than 1,000 claims, in addition to claims made by insurers direct to police authorities.

On the same day as the Prime Minister's statement, the Government announced a £10 million recovery scheme to help local authorities with their immediate costs. That operates on a similar basis to the Bellwin scheme, but does not have the qualifying threshold of 0.2% of revenue budget. That makes it easier for local authorities to receive support. Above the threshold, the Bellwin scheme has been activated.

We have offered advice and support to all the local authorities affected; they have dedicated contact officials at the Department. Some 35 local authorities have registered for the £20 million high street support scheme, which was set up specifically to support small and medium-sized enterprises affected.

We have listened to local partners and extended the payment deadline to 3 January, and extended the deadline for local authorities to submit claims to 31 January. That seems appropriate, so that local authorities can try

[Robert Neill]

to get going in the run-up to Christmas. It is also worth paying tribute to the business community. A £3 million charitable "High Street Fund" has been set up by Sir William Castell and the Wellcome Foundation, with a £500,000 donation from the Mayor of London, to offer immediate recovery grants. Business in the Community and the British Retail Consortium have also played an active part.

Inland Revenue has handled some 1,286 calls and agreed to some 162 time-to-pay agreements for customers whose cash flow is affected, worth about £3.4 million. We have also set aside £1 million for a homelessness support scheme to deal with the immediate re-housing costs of those who were directly made homeless. Every household that approached their local authority for assistance has either been re-housed or provided with advice and assistance. In Haringey, we have provided £35,000 for two caseworkers to support families in the River Heights estate. I, along with the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), held a recovery advice surgery for MPs from affected constituencies, which a number of hon. Members present attended.

We have set up the Riot Communities and Victims Panel, chaired by Darra Singh. I will check whether it has been to Hackney, but it is carrying out a number of visits around the country. I am sure that its objective is to meet as many authorities as possible. The panel will publish an interim report in November and present a final report to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition in March 2012.

It is worth highlighting the community response, such as the "Love" campaigns in Manchester and Salford, "Liverpool Clean Up", and the work done by Haringey's community assistance centre, Tottenham Green leisure centre, and the volunteers in Vauxhall. In the medium term, we are providing £20 million through the London enterprise fund for the regeneration of Tottenham and Croydon, which will be administered alongside the Mayor of London's £50 million recovery fund.

Mr Lammy: Does the Minister recognise that £10 million for Tottenham will simply not be sufficient for the needs of the poorest constituency in London?

Robert Neill: That is specific targeting that goes to Tottenham and Croydon, in recognition of their circumstances, which no others receive. In addition, the Mayor has announced taskforces for Tottenham and Croydon. The one for Tottenham is headed by Sir Stuart Lipton, and that for Croydon by Julian Metcalfe, the entrepreneur behind Pret A Manger. It is not the end of the story.

I welcome the support from the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) for Louise Casey and her work in the problem families unit in my Department. The unit is working to deliver early interventions to 120,000 problem families. We are consulting on the question of evicting antisocial families. I know that different views have been expressed in the debate, but we think that that is a legitimate tool that should be in the box, and authorities of all political complexions have viewed it as an appropriate option. Ultimately, such matters are decided by the courts.

Finally, the Home Secretary is leading a cross-Government review with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the problem of gang violence, which is a huge issue that we certainly need to tackle. Powerful points were made in the debate, and I am sure that they will inform the work of that review. I hope that I have given hon. Members an indication of the serious steps that the Government have been taking to deal with the issue.

5.44 pm

Gavin Barwell: With the leave of the House, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I think that when my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), coming from their different perspectives, can agree on the need to diversify our police force, we are reminded that, sometimes, less separates us than we sometimes acknowledge in debates in the main Chamber.

I apologise to hon. Members who have sat patiently through the debate, but who have not had the chance to speak. I hope that the Government will reflect on the need for further debates on the issues. I want to thank the Government and the Minister in particular for his response, and for the work that he and the Mayor of London have done. A lot still remains to be done.

I want to end with a simple thought. If my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth will forgive me—everyone else who has spoken in the debate represents a London constituency—I will say that our city is a great city—in my opinion, the greatest in the world—but it still has profound problems. What happened in early August is a reminder of them. I want to end by saying thank you to the public servants who went above and beyond the call of duty to support Londoners over those few days, and to the residents of our city for the response that they have shown—that we will not allow what happened to set our city back, and that we will rebuild, and rebuild stronger. I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 October 2011

[MR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

Green Belt (England)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr Goodwill.)*

9.30 am

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Crausby. The number of Members attending this debate shows concern about the future of our green belt among not only our constituents but Members. As individuals, we understand and accept the importance of the green belt and the need to ensure that it is not only protected but enhanced.

At the outset, I will make what some might call a declaration of interest, although it is not. It is important to put on the record that my partner—that is the appropriate word, although it is one I do not particularly like to use—is a director of Persimmon and sits on its board. He would be first to agree that I have never been in anybody's pocket, and much as he may try to suggest otherwise, he continues to exert little, if any, influence in my life, or control over it. It is important to make that declaration, however, given that allegations were made yesterday about the Conservative party being in the pocket of donors and developers. Nevertheless, the fact that so many Conservative Members are attending the debate this morning shows that we are our own people and speak on behalf of our constituents.

As hon. Members will appreciate, the green belt has a long and noble history. It was first developed in London in 1938, and Birmingham and Sheffield later took up that good idea. In 1955, the then Government urged all towns and cities to create green belts—bands of land around their environs designed specifically to restrict urban growth. Today, our green belts are more than just that; they are our green lungs and open spaces enjoyed by all. They are loved, cared for and valued by communities throughout England and no doubt in Wales—there is only one green belt in Wales—and Scotland. Today, however, we are discussing the green belt in England, because of the various concerns that have been raised about Government policy.

Particularly nowadays, the green belt defines communities, because it halts urban growth and maintains the identity of towns, villages and cities. My constituency provides a good example of how losing part of the green belt can lead to the sort of urban sprawl that it was deemed right to restrict in the 1930s, and which I believe should continue to be restricted. A person driving along the A6005, the road from Nottingham to Long Eaton in Derbyshire, will pass through communities such as Beeston, Chilwell and Toton, but they may not realise that they have left the city council boundary and entered my constituency and the area of Broxtowe borough council. Almost without break, there are only housing developments along the way. Many hon. Members will have similar examples in their constituencies of where the loss of the green belt has led to an unacceptable urban sprawl.

In Broxtowe, one can also see where the green belt has brought profound benefits to many communities. Along the B600, for example, Nuthall is desperately trying to retain its identity and not become part of the urban sprawl, even though that has already happened in part. The village of Watnall is keen to retain its identity along with that of Kimberley, but it is increasingly seeing the encroachment of urban sprawl. As one leaves Watnall, however, one sees the most beautiful stretch of countryside. I was born and bred in Nottinghamshire, so I feel qualified to say that although parts of my county do not contain the most beautiful pieces of countryside, where there are areas of beauty, we value and love them more. The area outside Watnall is particularly beautiful, and if hon. Members want to see a photograph of it, I urge them to visit my website. It is an historic and ancient piece of land, and those familiar with the writings of D. H. Lawrence will recognise the Moorgreen reservoir, which lies outside the boundaries of my constituency. That stretch of land, which undulates as it leads up to Greasley with St Mary's church in the distance, is beautiful. Even more importantly, however, it defines that area of Watnall from the top of my constituency—Greasley, Moorgreen and Newthorpe, which many would say are unfortunately sprawled together. That stretch of green belt land perfectly illustrates why we must continue to protect our green belt, and why we must ensure that we do not allow development on it, and certainly not on the scale proposed in my constituency.

I do not have anything other than green belt in my constituency, because there is no greenfield land. I do not wish to insult any of the lobby groups that have made representations to this House or newspapers such as *The Daily Telegraph*, which has launched a campaign, but there has been a lack of understanding about the important distinction between greenfield land and green belt land. Green belt land has always been specially protected, and the Government are determined that it will continue to enjoy that protection. It marks the land out as special and different from greenfield land, which does not enjoy such protection. There has been a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of that profound distinction.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con) *rose*—

Anna Soubry: I will give way to as many hon. Members as I can.

Mr Gray: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her comments so far and entirely agree with them all. However, as the representative of a constituency that has no green belt land but vast acreage of green fields, I do not necessarily agree that green belt land should be given special preference over greenfield land. We ought to protect our countryside, green and pleasant as it is, irrespective of whether it is green belt land or greenfield.

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend speaks with great passion on that issue, but this debate is about the green belt, and I hope he will forgive me if I continue to highlight the appallingly named draft national planning policy framework. All hon. Members, whatever party

[Anna Soubry]

they come from, will agree that one problem with planning is the abundance of jargon. If ever an offence were to be created it could perhaps be that of the overuse of jargon and terminology that is completely lost on most ordinary people. I congratulate the Government, however, on specifically writing a document in plain English. Let us have more of that when it comes to planning. Our green belt deserves special protection. I hear my hon. Friend's desire to protect his green fields, but green belt land is different, because it exists specifically to protect communities and prevent urban sprawl.

What has led to the situation in my constituency and the proposal to build up to 4,000 homes on the green belt in the most densely populated borough in the county, if not the east midlands? There are brownfield sites in my constituency, but enough for only 2,000 houses. The borough council has accepted a target of almost 6,000 homes, and the green belt is the only place where they can be built. I am opposed to that, and believe that I represent the overwhelming majority of my constituents in that opposition. It is a peculiar situation, given that the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the Leader of the House and every Minister I have met who is concerned about planning policy, has made it clear, in questions, speeches and so on, that the Government do not intend to alter the special protection afforded to our green belt. All hon. Members will agree that that is the right and proper thing to do.

As you see, Mr Crausby, my copy of the draft national planning policy framework is well thumbed, but pages 38 and 39 contain Government statements on the special need to continue to protect our green belt:

> "The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts…Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt… Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances."

On page 40, paragraph 144 states:

> "A local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in Green Belt."

Unfortunately, my council plans to build or to allow the development of some 4,000 new buildings on my local green belt.

Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Are not the principles established under the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 of creating the green belt, protecting the countryside and, most importantly, creating the lungs for our cities as vital today as they were in 1947?

Anna Soubry: The Prime Minister and others have made it clear that there will be no change to the special protection afforded to the green belt. It is unfortunate that there has been a high level of scaremongering. If we believe what has been said by the Prime Minister and his Ministers—no doubt this Minister will give us yet more assurances—that does not square with the notion that our green belt is in any way under threat. I stress again that we are talking about the green belt. Unfortunately, it is under threat in my constituency, and I believe that it is in many other constituencies across the country.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a valid point, but does she agree that her constituency is fortunate to have a green belt? Many of us represent constituencies that do not have one. In my constituency, the city of Southampton, a very large city, has no green belt whatever. That puts the green fields on the edge of the city, which separate it from villages such as Nursling, Rownhams and Chilworth, under extreme stress.

Anna Soubry: I absolutely understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, but the great joy, as I see it, in the policy as outlined in the document that we are discussing is that it will enable communities to come together and work together to consider how best they can encourage growth and development in their areas. The two are not incompatible. I shall move on to a good example of sustainable development.

Mr James Clappison (Hertsmere) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate and on the powerful case that she is making. She has mentioned the word "sustainable". Would she, like me, welcome from the Minister today a statement that the presumption in favour of sustainable development, which has attracted so much interest, is overridden by green belt policy and should play no part in green belt policy and that the protection for the green belt will remain as strong as it was under the existing policy, if not stronger?

Anna Soubry: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend when he makes that point with such passion, but in some communities people may be content to have development on their green belt. That may be what they wish, if they see the benefit in their area. That is the beauty of this document, combined with the Localism Bill. That will enable communities to form their own neighbourhood plans, which may lead in turn to development on their green belt. In my opinion, if that is what communities want, that is what they should get. Sustainable development and some building on the green belt are not completely in opposition.

I argue that in my constituency we are in a different position, because we have so little green belt, which has been eroded by development over the years. If people look at a map of my constituency, they will see the spaces between the city and the communities that make up my constituency, which have their identities protected by the green belt and therefore retain their identities by virtue of the green belt.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): It seems to me very dangerous to allow green belt land to be developed, even if very nice local people are in favour of it, because although this generation may like it, the next generation will have to deal with the problems.

Anna Soubry: Many people in my constituency would completely echo my hon. Friend's comments. Certainly in relation to Broxtowe, I completely agree with him. I can see little merit in any surrendering of the green belt in my constituency, for all the reasons that I have outlined.

Sustainable development has got a very bad name, whereas it should have a very good name. I shall give a quick example of how sustainable development could enhance the lives of people not just in my constituency, but in other parts of Greater Nottingham and, indeed, in other counties, such as Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and some parts of Leicestershire. It has to do with improvement of the A453. I will not dwell too long on this, but the A453 is the road that serves the city of Nottingham, and it is a disgrace. It needs widening, improving, dualling and making safe. It needs to be a modern road to bring jobs, prosperity and growth to not only the city of Nottingham, but my constituency, because the enterprise zone that the Government have announced lies both within the city and within the borough of Broxtowe in my constituency.

A considerable amount of money is required to make that improvement to the A453, and unfortunately the Government, because of the economic mess that we inherited, cannot at the moment find the money to improve it, but the county council has offered some money. It has begun to work with Rushcliffe borough council, which has also offered some money. Unfortunately, the city of Nottingham has yet to join in with that idea, but it strikes me that that road could be improved as part of a radical rethink involving councils coming together to consider proper sustainable development. That might mean a substantial number of new homes being built at the city end of it, but the infrastructure would be improved at the same time, because the A453 would be improved. Such an improvement would link to existing public transport, given the railway station at the other end, East Midlands Parkway. Rather than alienating or destroying our environment, any such development would embrace and enhance our environment. The housing development that I want to see would be exciting and innovative. It would provide great homes for people and great places for people to enjoy and for children to play in.

That is all in sharp contrast with the sort of development that has blighted my constituency and, I suspect, many others. I shall give an example, but I want to make it clear that this is no reflection on the people. A constituency such as mine is a great place to live, because of the people who live in it and the homes that they make, but those homes are often in frankly unacceptable developments. I shall provide a quick example of the tired old policy planning that we have seen in Broxtowe. I am referring to a development opposite Bilborough college. The houses there—the homes that people have made—are splendid and lovely, but the roads are too narrow. The whole development was constructed under the previous Administration's appalling building regulations, which often led to over-dense developments. As I have said, the roads are too narrow. There was no understanding of the modern lives that people live, so we find cars parked up on pavements. There was no appreciation of the fact that the college opposite does not allow students to park on its premises, so they park all over people's front drives, again cluttering up the pavements. There is no public transport—can you believe it?—to serve the development. It was in effect just plonked down, and I fear that that is a common feature not only in my constituency, but throughout the country.

Why are plans given the go-ahead or de facto given the go-ahead in my constituency by my borough council? I should say at this point that my borough council is controlled by a coalition of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. I am sure that the Minister will join me in urging his Liberal Democrat colleagues in Broxtowe seriously to reconsider the route that they have decided to go along when it comes to future growth in my constituency. In short—again, this will be familiar to a number of hon. Members—they formed something called the Greater Nottingham joint planning advisory board. Such a term would strike terror into the hearts of many people, if they could even begin to understand it. Bizarrely, the board is chaired by Broxtowe. It accepted the previous Government's top-down housing target. It then decided, having seen that the coalition Government were going to implement their policy to abolish the regional spatial strategy and those top-down housing targets, to continue to accept the figures that had been revised by the Government. As Members know, we sought to abolish the RSS, but the High Court would not allow us to, so until we pass the Localism Bill, we are left with the RSS housing figures. That has meant that the board has accepted the target of 52,049 homes for what is called Greater Nottingham. Of those, 5,765 are to be built in Broxtowe.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): On the RSS figures and the High Court hearing, does my hon. Friend accept that the Localism Bill is emerging legislation, so if local authorities had the, shall we say, strength of character—I cannot use the word I want to use here—to stand behind the emerging legislation, they could ignore the RSS numbers the previous Government forced on them?

Anna Soubry: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I have certainly taken the view—I may be wrong, so I am pleased that another Member agrees with me—that local authorities are absolutely not bound by the RSS figures, and if they have the courage, they can break free of them. Indeed, I was going on to give the example of Rushcliffe, which has taken exactly that route. For some reason, however, my local authority, along with other local authorities, has decided to accept the figures, even though it can break free of them. It is not waiting for the great powers the Localism Bill will give local communities or for the planning policy framework to come fully into force.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My constituency is in London and has a heck of a lot of green belt and green land. My constituents and I are particularly worried that when regional strategies come to an end in the rest of the country, our constituency will still have to comply with the London plan, which imposes a lot on local planning. We are extremely worried that the London plan will impose things on local people that they just do not want. I am thinking, in particular, of councils.

Anna Soubry: Again, I am grateful for that contribution. I may be wrong, but I think the planning policy framework and the Localism Bill will encourage councils to work together, which is critical. It might be asked whether Broxtowe is not working with the city of Nottingham, Erewash, parts of Ashfield and Gedling council to form the joint planning advisory board, and it is right that they are working together. However, it is a question of getting the balance right so that councils are not in the pockets of a metropolitan area or more powerful councils.

[Anna Soubry]

It is about councils having equality among themselves and working together in the manner I tried to describe in relation to the development of the A453. It should be about the county council and the borough and district councils coming together and taking a broad, sensible view for their mutual benefit. They should look at how we can have housing and how we can improve our environment and our infrastructure—in other words, proper sustainable development.

To return to the issue of Broxtowe for a moment, whatever the council might say now, it has in effect accepted the 5,765 figure, which is in all the documentation, in the press releases and in the letters that were sent out to some residents. It has actually designated its preferred sites. There are to be 800 homes on the green belt between Toton and the town of Stapleford. If we look at a map, we see that that green belt perfectly defines communities and stops sprawl, but the borough council says it is the preferred site for the development of 800 homes. Another site is to the north of Stapleford, near the village of Trowell. Many say that Trowell has lost much of its wonderful village status, which could be seen in the 1950s, when the village was chosen to mark the festival of Britain celebrations. That green belt land defines those communities, as well as providing beautiful open green spaces and wonderful views for people to enjoy. The irony is that the borough council says this is a preferred site for hundreds of new homes.

My other beef is the complete lack of real consultation. In this day and age, authorities cannot just impose homes and new housing on people in an authoritarian way; they have to consult people and work with them. I went to a number of public meetings in my constituency, and people's overwhelming cry was that the proposals were a done deal, and they felt cheated of any form of consultation. Real anger was expressed in those meetings, and rightly so.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue is not only where the homes go, but the assumptions behind why we need so many houses in the first place? Those assumptions or guidelines are never consulted on, but they are crucial.

Anna Soubry: Again, I am extremely grateful for that positive intervention. My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I hear stories of how different local authorities are stepping away from the figures and determining their own figures. One of the assurances I hope to obtain from the Minister is that local authorities will be able to determine their own housing needs and will not blindly accept figures imposed without consultation by bodies whose work those authorities have had no input in and no say over.

That is exactly the approach being taken by Rushcliffe borough council, which borders my borough council in Broxtowe. It is perhaps a surprise that Rushcliffe borough council is Conservative run. It has stepped away in large part from the Greater Nottingham joint planning advisory board, of which it was once a fully fledged member. Rushcliffe accepts that there may be some build on some of its green belt, because it is keen to have growth and sustainable development. However, instead of imposing that on people, as has, I am afraid, happened in my constituency, Rushcliffe has done the exact opposite; it has gone out to people and it has had workshops and full consultations with communities. It has not only consulted parish councils, but drilled right down into communities, so that people can come along, join the debate and take a real, meaningful part in the process of determining what communities want, not only now, but in the future.

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): The hon. Lady is expanding on her case brilliantly. Is not the big hope for the transformation the Government are undertaking that planning will in future happen with communities, not to them, reflecting local need, not centralist tendencies?

Anna Soubry: I thank the hon. Gentleman. That is absolutely right. There are many examples of that. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) is heading up a neighbourhood plan in her constituency, where there has, understandably, been resistance to the spread of Truro. She tells me that if people in that part of Cornwall are to get the growth and jobs they want and need so much, they will have to take a more imaginative, co-operative view, which is exactly what she wants to achieve. In keeping with the approach the hon. Gentleman rightly identified, she is working with communities, not alienating them, as has been the tendency in the past and as is the case, I am afraid, in my constituency.

Bob Stewart: On that point, why can we not take the words

"presumption in favour of sustainable development",

out of the planning policy framework and insert the words "presumption in favour of local consultation before some planning decisions"? That would be a great idea, although others might disagree.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am sure the Minister has heard his comments, and he will no doubt respond in his speech. However, I wish to bring my remarks to an end.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): My hon. Friend and neighbour and I are separated by some green belt, which perhaps gives us both an incentive to protect it even more. Before she winds up her powerful remarks, however, may I direct her to another comment in the draft planning policy framework, which says the advantage of the green belt is that it assists urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict land? Does she agree that before anyone even thinks of taking the easy option of taking away some beautiful green fields, they should tackle some of the problem contaminated brownfield sites we all have in our constituencies, which are not used? Moving those sites back into use would be a far more effective way of proceeding.

Anna Soubry: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a brilliant point, and I am grateful to have him as my neighbour, with or without any green belt that may separate us. He makes an important point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) may hear, about the value of sustainable development, which is not just about building more homes: it is much more than that.

It is about bringing jobs and enhancing the environment. That may mean clearing up sites, as my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) said, so that homes may be built, or business be generated or regenerated. There are many sites, such as the Stanton works, with which my hon. Friend and I are familiar, where hundreds if not thousands of people once worked. We need that imaginative approach, which lies at the heart of sustainable development as defined in the framework and identified in the Localism Act 2011.

I suspect that what is happening in my constituency is not unique, and that is something that concerns us all.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a great case for the green belt, but housing numbers are an issue and people need to live somewhere. In our towns and city centres there is living accommodation above shops. All sorts of accommodation often lies empty. It would do towns and city centres good if those properties were refurbished and lived in. That would take pressure off the green belt and green fields.

Anna Soubry: I completely agree with that helpful intervention. We need a revolution, in the best sense of the word, in the way we provide the new homes that so many people want, without damaging the environment: on the contrary, we can enhance it as we provide those homes. However, we must continue to protect the green belt, because of its special features.

Nigel Mills: I want to ask my hon. Friend a question that I know is of concern to her as well as me, about the impact of open-cast mining on the green belt. Last week, sadly, an application for open-cast mining in the area of Smalley in my constituency was approved by Derbyshire county council. Does my hon. Friend agree that homes are not the only problem that threatens the green belt? There are also the despoiling open-cast coal mines, which, instead of dealing with contaminated land that needs to be cleaned up, merely rip up green fields. We should have protection from those.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Paragraph 145 of the draft national planning policy framework unfortunately includes mineral extraction—the very sort of open-cast mining that blights Amber Valley and sits hanging over my constituency, between Cossall and Trowell. The paragraph makes it clear that such works are not necessarily inappropriate in green belt land. I respectfully suggest to the Government that they are wholly inappropriate in green belt land. I know that open-cast mines can be restored, and I therefore understand why they are in the paragraph, but in the short term—and, it could be argued, in the much longer term—they are scourges of the countryside. They are horrible open scars. Open-cast mining and green belt are irreconcilable. I hope that the Government will consider that paragraph and do all that they can to protect the green belt from open-cast mining.

I hope that the Minister will make it clear that the Government take the view that, as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) said, local authorities do not have to accept the regional spatial strategy figures, and that they have the freedom and power to determine their own housing need. Planning policy statement 3 makes it clear that in determining housing need local authorities should take into account evidence of sustainable land. I may be wrong, and I hope for some clarification, but I believe that when a local authority considers its housing need it must take into account the land available to it—especially sustainable land. That means that it must consider its green belt. It cannot be the case that homes can be built on the scale in question in Broxtowe on green belt. It is not appropriate or compatible. It is imperative that councils consider the land available to them, and that if it is green belt land it is effectively a no-go area.

Having spoken to colleagues and others, I believe that there is a great danger that what is happening in Broxtowe will be allowed to take place in other parts of England, and that we need a transitional period to make sure that we protect our green belt before the Localism Act 2011 and the policy framework come into full effect. Currently many authorities are rushing through their local plans, ignoring the 2011 Act, the framework and the certainty provided by the statements made by the Prime Minister and many others that our green belt will continue to have special protection. What Broxtowe is doing presents a danger of a presumption in favour of development on green belt, which means it will be completely vulnerable to over-keen developers and heavy-handed councils.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak for so long. It is the overwhelming desire of the hon. Members present, and others throughout the House—because it is the overwhelming view of the majority of people in this country, the constituents we represent—that the green belt should be considered special. It needs to be protected and enhanced, so that it is here not just for our generation but for generations yet to come.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): I intend to call the two Front Benchers at 20 to 11. There are a number of potential speakers, and I may not get to call them all.

10.6 am

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on obtaining this important debate. I agree with much, if not all, of what she said. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Crausby.

There is housing need in this country; people need to live somewhere. However, that cannot be at the expense of concreting over the countryside. It is essential, in particular, that we should protect the green belt. I welcome what the hon. Lady said about the Minister writing to local authorities like mine to confirm the point about the RSS figures. That is important, because it will determine exactly what the policies are. She gave a good description of concerns about local authority attitudes. Local authorities need to know what numbers are needed, so that councils such as Sefton, which is drawing up its core strategy at the moment, can determine within the strategy whether there is even a need to look at the green belt. I am sure that the same considerations apply to the constituencies of many right hon. and hon. Members here today.

Green belt surrounds the many towns and small villages that make up Sefton Central. The town of Crosby is surrounded on two sides, at least, by green

[Bill Esterson]

belt, which separates the village of Little Crosby from Great Crosby. The land up the Sefton coast to Hightown and then on to Formby is nearly all green belt, with the village of Ince Blundell sitting in between. In the Sefton Council draft core strategy, much of that is indicated as potential development sites. The same is true in the east of my constituency, around Maghull, Lydiate, Aintree and Melling. The people in those areas have objected in very large numbers to the prospect of large-scale housing developments and business use. I am sure that those comments will be familiar to other hon. Members. The concern is that much of that land is already owned by would-be developers, by people who have a history in development and by landowners who are not currently using that land. That land is nearly all grade 1 or grade 2 agricultural land. We have some of the best farming land in the country in Sefton, and the prospect of it being developed and built on is a big worry, given the concerns about food availability.

Bob Stewart: At the moment, one can have planning permission for three years and an extension of three years. Would it not be a good idea to say, "You have planning permission for three years, and you have to do it within that time," and include completion dates and phases in the planning permission, which would also help the local plan?

Bill Esterson: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman—it is a fair point—but I am not sure that that is quite what I was getting to regarding the ownership of agricultural land in my constituency.

The hon. Member for Broxtowe mentioned the potential for councils coming forward with plans on the green belt, and gave some examples. There is an example in the village of Lydiate, where recently plans were proposed. They were for a development in the green belt outside a clearly defined urban area, and had the support of planning officers. The Leeds and Liverpool canal runs through my constituency, and the plans were for a marina on the canal. On the face of it, it was a sensible development suggestion, but it was in the green belt and would have broken a clear barrier between the urban and green belt areas. It was worrying to see planning officers recommending its approval. Fortunately, the planning committee turned it down and the planning inspectorate appeal upheld the decision, saying that it would clearly be an inappropriate development in the green belt.

As the hon. Lady said, the guidance is clear in the policy framework: the benefits have significantly to outweigh the harm for planning to be appropriate in the green belt. That has been the case for many years, and it is rightly still set out clearly in the national planning policy framework. The worry is that councils will go ahead and try to push through development in the green belt that, under that guidance, we would all consider inappropriate. The question is how we find ways to make it difficult for councils to develop in the green belt and so protect it, while addressing the need for housing, which, for many young people, is unaffordable—many people are still living at home. There is also a shortage of sheltered accommodation for our growing elderly population. We have to bear in mind such questions when considering this issue. Sustainable development also fits into that conversation. How do we meet housing need while protecting the green belt?

We have set out concerns about the impact on the brownfield first policy. It is vital to reaffirm the importance of building on brownfield sites. The point has been well made by groups such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England. What is meant by sustainable development needs spelling out, and we need a reaffirmation that this Government support the policy of brownfield first, as the previous two Governments did. We need to continue that policy.

We also need to make greater use of empty homes. There are 6,000 empty homes in Sefton, which is more than twice the national average. That is a big problem for us.

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): May I take the hon. Gentleman back to the brownfield first principle, which was initiated by the previous Government? It has been successful—apart from the fact that brownfield sites also included people's back gardens, which is one of the first things this Government addressed. However, I totally agree with him: perhaps we should ask the Minister to reiterate the principle of brownfield first and make sure it is embedded in new legislation.

Bill Esterson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I give credit to the previous Conservative Government—I probably will not do that again in my speech, so make the most of it—because it was they who initiated the brownfield first policy. There has been a continuation of planning policy over the years, and a great deal of consensus. It is important that that consensus be maintained.

I was about to talk about empty homes and their importance in Sefton and elsewhere. I would add the importance of using windfall sites. There are a number of windfall sites in Sefton that can deliver many hundreds of new homes, which would remove some of the pressure on the green belt. Councils are not allowed to use windfall sites or empty homes in their calculations, and that puts additional pressure on greenfield sites and the green belt. I completely agree with the hon. Members who mentioned greenfield sites. Urban green space is as important, if not more so, than the green belt in some cases. However, as we are talking about the green belt today, I shall concentrate on that.

What we need fleshed out is a policy that supports sustainable development. One way of doing that is for the Government to make moves to help develop brownfield sites first and regenerate empty homes. It will not surprise hon. Members to know that I am calling for a reduction in VAT on renovations, because that would level the playing field between refurbishment and renovation on the one hand and new build on the other.

Neil Parish: My constituency has a brownfield site, Webster's garage in Axminster, where all the surrounding development is stopping the plan by having ransom strips and the like. The development, which would be right in the centre of town, has not happened for years. We need to put more pressure on local authorities and others to bring those sites together. Otherwise, they stay festering for years.

Bill Esterson: That is absolutely right. There is legislation that enables local councils to put pressure on landowners to use unsightly and unused pieces of land and buildings, but I am afraid that few councils make use of it. I hope the Minister is listening and will comment on the issue later. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) is absolutely right—we need to put pressure on landowners. One of the concerns in Sefton is that people or organisations that own large numbers of empty properties are leaving them sitting around for years and doing nothing with them. The properties fall into disuse and become targets for vandalism and a magnet for crime and antisocial behaviour. There are all sorts of other reasons, covering the broader term of sustainability, why we need action on exactly the issue the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

The Government should take seriously the idea of cutting VAT to encourage renovation of empty homes. The policy is being proposed by the Opposition, and I know why the Government are against it, but if we want to encourage sustainable development they need to act. If VAT on renovations is not cut, what are the other options?

Mr Andrew Turner: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that an alternative is to impose VAT on new buildings?

Bill Esterson: That would be a mistake, because that would restrict growth. Part of the debate on the NPPF is about using the planning regime to encourage growth. Increasing VAT on new build would restrict growth rather than encourage it. There are a number of reasons why a cut in VAT would be valuable, not just in bringing back empty homes and helping to protect the green belt, but in boosting the construction industry, which is one of the most effective ways of getting the economy moving again and solving some of the housing problems. It is more important to level the playing field in that way, rather than by raising VAT. There would be a huge outcry from the construction industry, as the hon. Gentleman would find, if VAT was introduced on new build.

When the national planning policy framework finally becomes a reality, I hope to see a greater emphasis on brownfield sites, empty homes and windfall land, all of which would help to protect the green belt.

The hon. Member for Broxtowe rightly mentioned some of the problems that occurred under previous unstructured planning regimes, including the development of far too many soulless housing estates and industrial developments. The problems that stem from such developments include feelings of isolation, a poor sense of community and a lack of employment opportunities. Therefore, in removing some of the planning framework, the NPPF must be careful to ensure that we do not go back to such unstructured planning, which is why the definition of sustainable development is so important. We must avoid, as we are all seeking to do, ending up with more urban sprawl into the green belt.

I mentioned the planning application that was turned down in Lydiate. One of the big threats to the green belt comes from councils. In trying to meet housing targets, they often feel that they have little choice other than to build on green belt land.

VAT cuts on renovations have the support of the Federation of Master Builders, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Campaign to Protect Rural England. In total, some 49 business organisations back the idea, and the Government would do well to look at it because there is such strong support for it in the country. The idea of creating a level playing field between new build and renovation is essential; it is a good way to protect green space and the green belt.

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): Consistency and a level playing field is a big issue. I have residents in the green belt who have had small extensions or small sections of hardstanding turned down because they are inappropriate; yet just around the corner, large developers are planning thousands of new homes. We need a level playing field between the small guys and the large developers. Does the hon. Gentleman think that that exists at the moment?

Bill Esterson: Such an imbalance is caused by the fact that the large developer has access to financial resources, expertise and expert legal and professional witnesses. We need such protections included in the NPPF. However, by putting the onus on local communities and local authorities to object to inappropriate development, my concern is that we may make matters worse. We all appreciate that the local authorities are cash-strapped and have faced big cuts in resources—I will not go into the politics of that. Local communities do not have the resources or the expertise to object to large-scale planning applications. Unless we are careful, the danger is that the situation will become far worse. We need the Government to beef up the NPPF before it becomes law.

In conclusion, we need to protect the green belt—the hon. Lady has done us all a big service in holding this debate today—and ensure that the councils have the tools to do it. The key to that is a definition of sustainable development that encourages local communities and councils to balance the need to protect the green belt in the long term against the need for housing. To do that, we need policies that flesh out what is meant by sustainable development. We should place greater emphasis on using brownfield sites, empty properties and windfall land. If we go down that route, we will be in a much stronger position to protect the green belt, as we all want to do.

10.25 am

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on an eloquent and important speech. I will be as brief as I can and will try not to repeat the comments that have been made so far. I endorse many of the points that the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) made, particularly his important concluding remarks.

As my constituency consists of the urban sprawl of Poole and then villages and small towns, the green belt is of great importance to us. My constituency is also distinguished by its large amount of heathland, which is a great constraint on development. I was a vociferous campaigner against the south-west regional spatial strategy and the housing it imposed from above on my constituency. There were excellent campaign groups, such as "Keep Corfe Mullen Green" and "Keep Wimborne Green". We were all delighted when the regional spatial strategy housing numbers were scrapped—or so we thought.

[Annette Brooke]

Throughout our campaign, I was conscious of the need for affordable housing; we need it desperately. What we did not need was more executive houses and more second homes in our green belt. I had a vision of communities working together because they know what their local housing need is. I wanted to see full involvement from the bottom up. I was delighted in principle with the Localism Bill and the thrust of the NPPF. As ever, though, the devil is in the detail, but I do accept the principles.

As the detail is missing in both the Localism Bill and the NPPF, we have a particular problem with transition. In the few minutes that I have, I should like to talk about the problems of transition and how I think the green belt will be compromised. Let me take the example of Corfe Mullen in my constituency. Originally, all the local councils—not the parish council—signed up to building 700 houses in the most beautiful valley imaginable. Eventually, the district council backtracked, but the matter still went to the examination in public, with the county council supporting the development. The spatial strategy had been scrapped, so we thought that the beautiful valley would be saved. East Dorset district council worked on its core strategy and excluded this site; it had listened and that was good. None the less, there are developers out on Pardy's Hill, obviously sizing up the site. My fear is that a quick planning application will come in and we will be back to square one.

We must think about the transition. We need ministerial guidance on transition now. The coalition has a real vision of local neighbourhood planning, but, please, we must protect our green belt, urban green spaces and valuable agricultural land. If we do not get to grips with that aspect, our vision will be totally lost. For the sake of our constituents and those who campaigned so hard against Labour's top-down approach, please do not let this happen. There is much to be said, but we have another debate later this week, so I will make further points then.

10.29 am

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Thank you, Mr Crausby, for calling me to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing this important debate. The number of Members who have turned up shows how important the green belt is for many MPs.

I turned up here in Westminster Hall 18 months ago, when we had a very similar debate about the green belt and the Localism Bill. I was delighted that that Bill was introduced to ensure the protection of the green belt and to ensure that local communities decide where houses go. The problem is that that debate was 18 months ago.

Since then, I was delighted when the national planning policy framework included special protection for the green belt. However, the reality on the ground in our constituencies is that developers are currently putting in applications to develop green belt land. In South Gloucestershire, we are only just managing to hold off the developers, with the local council working together with residents to ensure that the green belt is protected. Even though we are going to the Planning Inspectorate and applications by developers are being thrown out, in one area of Longwell Green developers submitted an application to build 80 houses on green belt land. We defeated that application, which involved a 1,000-signature petition, by going through the whole planning process, but the developer, having had his application rejected, has now put in another application for 25 houses on the green belt.

My constituents' patience is wearing thin. They support the Government's desire to protect the green belt; they believe the Government are protecting the green belt; and they believe that I, the local MP, am standing up for the green belt in the wonderful areas of Kingswood, where I grew up. However, we need to act now, and we need to be on the side of David, our residents, rather than on the side of Goliath, the developers.

I urge the Minister to consider the suggestion that if a developer puts in a planning application on greenfield or green belt land and that application is rejected, they should not be allowed to put in another application for another five years, or perhaps 10 years, because we cannot have this situation whereby developers are allowed, time and time again, to run riot over our planning process.

10.31 am

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Crausby, for calling me to speak.

I rise to speak as an MP for the north-east. I am disappointed that there are no other MPs here from Northumberland, Newcastle, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, Durham or Teesside. Nevertheless, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing this debate, where she has made a compelling case. In addition, I entirely support what has just been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore).

I will speak very briefly, because I am very conscious that time is short. I want to emphasise my community's desire to protect the green belt areas that are in or near my constituency. There is a need for housing in Northumberland and young people certainly struggle to get on the housing ladder. Without them, the schools, villages, shops and communities that make up the fabric of God's own county struggle. We have small villages in Kielder, Riding Mill and Wylam where there is a need for community-based affordable housing, which is surely the way forward.

That aim is best achieved by the type of town and village plans that are being brought forward. They should be supported, and I entirely endorse the work that has been done by local villages such as Ponteland and in towns such as Hexham, which is my local town. Those villages and towns are putting forward really good local plans to establish how they will run their local communities. That is the way forward, not the bureaucratic, top-down, regional spatial nonsense that was forced on us by the previous Government and that great pioneer of planning and housing, John Prescott.

In the limited time that I have to speak, I want to touch briefly on urban regeneration. I am talking about regeneration not only in rural Northumberland but in places such as Newcastle, Gateshead and Tyne and Wear, which have sites that can be taken up and utilised.

I urge the Minister to make it a fundamental priority that urban regeneration is done not only in large cities but in smaller villages and towns.

The usage of Government sites is another priority. In my area, two former hospital sites have lain derelict for nearly 20 years. The Stannington hospital site has not been used since 1993. We—the taxpayers—have paid more than £1 million to keep it secure during the past 15 to 20 years, but not a building has been built, nobody lives there and nobody has done anything with the site. We therefore have a Government-owned site, a need for housing and, hopefully, a way in which that site can be utilised for housing in the future, which would also release funds that the Government clearly need. That is the sort of project that we should be highlighting and identifying with, not anything in relation to building on the green belt or greenfield sites. The former mental hospital site at Prudhoe in my area is being developed in the way that I have just outlined. I would have liked that project to include more affordable housing, but there is a good, sustainable mix of housing, which is the way forward.

I also want to touch on the scandal of empty homes. I will be very curious to hear the Minister's response on this point. In the region of Northumberland, including in my constituency, there are 2,351 empty homes, as established by an audit carried out by the county council in April. Those homes were not used in the six months prior to April and were therefore sitting idle. We could do so much with those properties in the towns and villages where they are located. The county council is conducting an excellent project on using empty homes. I support and endorse that project, and I hope that the council's approach will be supported by the Minister.

I will make a final point. If there is an example of the housing that we should be getting, it is surely the Vanguard project. That is the pilot project put forward by the Government, which we are proud to have in Allendale in my constituency. Allendale Community Housing has got local communities and local partners involved. It has taken former sites and turned them around, with local partners providing the building, the jobs and the architects' work. I entirely credit the work of ACH in this matter. That type of development is the right way forward, and it is what we need to see, rather than there being any prospect of any building on the green belt.

I thank you, Mr Crausby, for the limited time that I have had today to speak.

10.36 am

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Crausby, for calling me to speak.

In the very short time available to me today, I will not try to respond to the many points made by the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), who sadly is no longer in his place, having spoken in the debate for 20 minutes.

The number of MPs here in Westminster Hall from both the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat parties shows the degree of concern about some of the planning changes proposed by Her Majesty's Government. I want to give the Government the benefit of the doubt, because they are genuinely trying to introduce localism and to hand decisions about development back to local people, but I will reserve my judgment, and if it turns out that those planning changes are a charter for developers, I, for one, will strenuously express my opposition to them. For now, however, the Government are right in trying to hand the decisions about these developments back to local people, represented by their local councillors, who are the right people to decide whether there should be building and, if so, where it should be.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Gray: I will not give way, because I do not have time to do so.

Right now, speaking in this debate on the green belt, I am in opposition, because in North Wiltshire we have no green belt—it does not exist in our area. However, we face very significant threats to areas such as Purton, Lydiard Millicent, Lydiard Tregoze and even Royal Wootton Bassett, which is called "royal" after the magnificent ceremony that took place on Sunday. Swindon is sprawling westwards and currently there is no constraint whatsoever apart from the "rural buffer zone"—no one quite knows what a "rural buffer zone" is. Equally, there is talk of putting 5,000 houses around the town of Chippenham, which is already growing very fast. Even in Malmesbury, there is talk about putting some houses in the Park Road estate, effectively on green belt land, which is very worrying.

I have written to Ministers about this subject, asking why we do not have green belts in North Wiltshire. We ought to have them, as we are under as much threat as anywhere else in England. I was very encouraged to receive a response from Ministers telling me that the body that can decide whether or not to have a green belt is, in fact, the local authority. It is not the Government but the local authority that can decide to have it. Now is the moment that the local authority can do that, when we are consulting on plans for the local area.

My message to Wiltshire unitary council—a very fine Conservative-run council—and indeed to councils up and down the land run by all sorts of parties is that if we are concerned about our green belt and the green fields surrounding our urban areas, there is a very simple solution. Let us create a green belt around the towns of Swindon and Chippenham, and let us say to developers, "You may not build on these green fields and green belt. You may not build there at all. You must build on brownfield sites in the centres of towns." Let us not do what Lord Prescott—who is much missed here in the Commons—did. You will recall, Mr Crausby, that he very famously said, "The green belt is a Labour triumph—let's build on it."

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): I would appreciate a very short contribution from Julian Sturdy.

10.39 am

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Thank you, Mr Crausby, for calling me to speak.

I want to focus very briefly on the Government's draft national planning policy framework. Thankfully, the draft framework seeks to protect the green belt provision, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). However, it is clear that

[Julian Sturdy]

the guidance regarding green belt land will be simplified. I am not against that, but it is vital that any such simplification does not equate to weaker green belt protections in practice, and I seek an assurance from the Minister on that. We all know that loose language can lead to loose definitions, which in turn can lead to loose interpretations of planning guidance, not to mention the potential for legal challenges. We must, therefore, clarify that point early on in the wider planning debate.

In addition, I am concerned about the clear emphasis in the draft planning framework that it should not be necessary to propose any new green belt land except in exceptional circumstances. Greenfield sites—mentioned by a number of Members—do not share the same protection as green belt land and, with the Government keen to introduce a presumption in favour of development, I am worried that there might be no further opportunities to extend green belt protection to such sites, which many communities in my constituency would like to see.

Green belt land plays a vital role in shaping and defining communities in rural areas across the country. The overwhelming majority of York Outer residents are proud of the beautiful countryside that surrounds their homes, their villages and the historic city of York. Local residents will fight to protect their green belt land, and I will stand by them.

10.41 am

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) has done our green and pleasant land a great service by initiating this debate.

In this House and in this country we cherish our green belt and our countryside, as captured in the immortal words of the great English anthem, "Linden Lea":

> "Within the woodlands, flowery gladed,
> 'neath the oak tree's mossy moot,
> The shining grass-blades, timber-shaded,
> Now do quiver under foot…
> And brown-leav'd fruit's a-turning red,
> In cloudless sunshine, overhead…
> To where, for me, the apple tree
> Do lean down low in Linden Lea."

But to cherish is not enough. The great planning settlement of 1947 sought to reconcile growth and development with a genuine say for local people and the protection of our natural environment. Historically, the purposes of green belt in planning policies were to protect the countryside from urban sprawl and to retain the character of towns and cities. Green belts are a buffer between towns, and between a town and the surrounding countryside, and within that belt damaged and derelict land can be improved and nature conservation encouraged.

Green belts are currently protected by planning policy guidance note 2, but that will be replaced by the national planning policy framework. The presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt unless there are very special circumstances that outweigh the harm caused by the development, is to be removed by the NPPF. At the moment, proposals in draft plans that would result in releasing land from the green belt must be fully justified; the Labour Government were committed to protecting the green belt and we encouraged the recycling of land and a brownfield-first approach.

Chris Skidmore: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Dromey: Given the time available, no.

The NPPF also removes Labour's brownfield-first policy. Under the Labour Government, the green belt expanded by 34,640 hectares. This Government have repeatedly said that policies to protect the green belt and nationally designated landscapes will be retained in the NPPF, but the framework, which replaces all planning guidance, does not give sufficient confidence to people who want our countryside to be protected and risks antagonising local communities rather than engaging them. Inevitably, there will be greater opposition, more appeals and a less effective planning system.

We badly need more development—well-designed and in the right place—not least because we have a growing housing crisis. The Government, however, have responded to legitimate concerns expressed by broad-based non-political organisations such as the National Trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England by calling them "left-wing" and "semi-hysterical," and by saying that the organisations are guilty of "nihilistic selfishness". In the current climate, we have the worst of all worlds: collapsing house building, chaos in the planning system and a chorus of voices whose concerns have not yet been properly heard.

How do we salvage some sense from this mess, and protect our green belt? First, we need a recognised definition of sustainable development. The Government should continue to support the widely-subscribed-to 2005 definition. Secondly, and crucially, we need a restoration of the successful brownfield-first policy, which was initiated under a Conservative Government and developed under a Labour one, with 76% of development on brownfield sites. There is currently enough brownfield land available to build 1.2 million homes. Thirdly, we need protection for our town centres. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) referred to the repopulation of our town centres, including people living above shops, and I strongly agree with his view. Fourthly, there should be a commitment to affordable housing, not the trading-off of such housing for reasons of viability and, fifthly, we need transitional arrangements that protect local communities against what will sometimes be predatory proposals by developers—a point that the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) was absolutely right to raise earlier. Finally, we hope that the Government will put the NPPF to a vote in both Houses of Parliament.

Specific concerns have been raised about the NPPF and the green belt. Some people believe that the draft framework does not maintain the existing green belt protections and that it should be improved and strengthened.

Mr Clappison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Dromey: Given the time available, no.

A legal opinion commissioned by the Campaign to Protect Rural England emphasises the need to retain the current presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt. Ministers have stated on a number of occasions that the draft NPPF maintains the current protection of the green belt, but although the draft framework incorporates a number of features of current policy—in PPG2, green belts—the CPRE believes that paragraphs 133 to 147 of the consultation draft policy contain a serious weakening of current protections for the following reasons—

Mr Clappison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Dromey: Given the time available, no.

The presumption in favour of sustainable development appears to apply in green belts as in all other locations—other than European wildlife sites—meaning, in the CPRE's view, that development proposals could be refused only if they were shown to harm the objectives of the NPPF as a whole, rather than being harmful purely in green belt policy terms, as at present. The loss of the presumption against inappropriate development is highlighted in the CPRE's legal opinion, and of particular concern is when the presumption in favour of sustainable development appears to apply in the green belt. Accordingly, the CPRE argues that the presumption against inappropriate development should be reinstated, and cross-referenced in the section covering the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Other concerns have been expressed by, for example, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which has received legal advice that the draft planning proposals would weaken protection for the 4,000 sites of special scientific interest across England. Concerns have also been expressed to us by people who value our village greens. As part of its consultation on village greens, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that it intends to charge communities £1,000 to start the process of protecting their local green spaces.

In conclusion, I would like to put certain questions to the Minister. First, does he agree with the CPRE's legal opinion that the green belt is at risk? Secondly, what is his view of the other potential loopholes in the draft policy? Thirdly, what is his view of the RSPB's legal advice that the draft planning proposals would weaken protection for 4,000 sites of special scientific interest? Fourthly, is it right to charge local communities £1,000 to safeguard their village greens?

The Government need to move beyond deriding their critics and polarising the debate. Legitimate concerns have been expressed. We need a system fit for purpose. I hope that the Minister responds constructively.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Stunell): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Crausby, in a debate that has generated huge interest from hon. Friends and other Members who have this concern on their constituency agendas. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on presenting her case with skill and liveliness. I appreciate her concern that many new homes might be built on green belt in Broxtowe, strictly in accordance with the old regional strategy. Her tour of the history of the green belt and the geography of her constituency was enlightening.

I declare an interest. I do not have a partner who is a developer, but I do have a constituency consisting exclusively of built-up areas and green belt. There is no other choice. I assure hon. Members and my hon. Friends that irrespective of my position in the Government, I entirely share their concern to ensure strong green belt policy that is not weakened by the reforms that we are making. In the brief time available, I hope that I can reassure her and others that far from weakening environmental protection, our planning reforms will strengthen them.

My hon. Friend made some specific points about her constituency and what she perceives to be the contrasting behaviour of the two district councils of Broxtowe and Rushcliffe. Propriety considerations prevent me from commenting on particular situations and requirements, because core strategies will be subjected to examination by independent inspectors appointed by the Secretary of State. Perhaps it is no bad thing that I am not in a position to comment.

My hon. Friend and several other people who spoke made points about the phraseology of the national planning policy framework. I will ensure that the *Hansard* record of this debate is entered into the consultation process, so remarks made here will be added to remarks received. The consultation officially finished on Monday, but if in the light of this debate hon. Members feel moved to contribute personally or on behalf of organisations, I assure them that if they are quick, their views will still be considered.

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): I am grateful for the Minister's clarifications. Can he give us a definition of a presumption of sustainable development?

Andrew Stunell: Fortunately, my task is made much easier by the fact that that definition takes up about a page and a half of the NPPF. I remind the House that there will be a debate specifically about that on Thursday, so I will contain my remarks to those aspects related to the green belt. I encourage hon. Members and my hon. Friends to contribute to the debate on Thursday.

Tessa Munt: Will the Minister consider supporting the Second Reading of my Electricity Transmission (Protection of Landscape) Bill, which covers land that is of value to the community but not strictly green belt land, particularly in view of the fact that parish councils will be putting together their plans and local people can be heard in that way?

Andrew Stunell: I have certainly heard what my hon. Friend says. I will concentrate on the green belt for the moment, if I may.

The draft NPPF sets out the Government's proposed policies on planning and retains the key policy protections for the green belt. I emphasise to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) that I preferred his choice of poetry to his choice of lawyer in his description of what we have done. The draft NPPF says:

> "Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances."

Those special circumstances, as my hon. Friend said while introducing this debate, are clearly set out. She drew particular attention to one aspect that she did not like, but that was an exception contained in the original green belt policy, which is currently in force.

Bill Esterson: The shadow Minister has given the legal opinion presented to the CPRE. Does the Minister have a legal opinion of his own giving an alternative view? It would be helpful if we could see the counter-view.

Andrew Stunell: As I have four minutes remaining, it is sensible for me simply to say that I hope that the hon. Gentleman will find the opportunity to make that point on Thursday during the wider debate.

The Government value the green belt highly. It is an essential planning tool to prevent sprawl, and its retention is a coalition agreement commitment. The abolition of the regional spatial strategies through the Localism Bill will stop the top-down pressure to review green belts in many areas. Some 30 green belt areas are currently under the kind of pressure that my hon. Friend outlined eloquently, due to the pressure exerted by regional spatial strategies, which often impose highly inappropriate numbers on areas without the physical capacity to take them.

In future, local planning authorities will be in control. It is certainly not for central Government to decide where green belts should be; as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) correctly advised the House, that is a matter for local authorities. He discussed green fields as opposed to green belts. The NPPF says clearly that

"the planning system should aim to conserve and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting valued landscapes".

There is a good deal more about environmental protection, to which I draw his attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Annette Brooke) asked about the transition from the current system to the new one. Whether anybody likes it or not, the existing planning system and its case law will remain in place until replaced by a new system. That new system will come into force upon the passage of the Localism Bill. At the moment, it is assumed that if the House is willing, that will happen on 1 April next year.

Authorities are free to make whatever assessment they believe they should make of their housing strategy and draw up plans in accordance with the current system as they think fit. They should, of course, pay full attention to current consultation procedures, and their core strategies will be subject to review by the independent planning inspectorate in exactly the same way.

That is not to say that legitimate concerns have not been raised about an interim situation. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington made the point that perhaps some will seek to exploit the difference. However, we want plans to be developed in accordance with the wishes of local communities and to create the homes, jobs, transport links and recreational facilities that we need to produce environmentally, socially and economically sustainable communities. It is the Government's clear intention to do so.

On empty homes—

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Badgers and Bovine TB

11 am

Mrs Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I am pleased to have been granted the opportunity to initiate this debate. Although my constituency of North Tyneside is largely urban—it has only four farms—the interests of my constituents are many and varied. They cover a wide range, including concerns about the Government's proposed culling of badgers.

I would never describe myself as an animal lover, but I would never wilfully hurt an animal. As a townie, I value being a member of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and in that role I have learned a lot about the issues that confront members of our rural and farming communities, the challenges they face in caring for the countryside and maintaining their animal herds, and the important role that they play in providing for the food chain. Furthermore, I have learned to respect their knowledge of and experience in all those matters.

Levels of bovine TB are unacceptable, not only for our farmers and the fate of their cattle, but for the taxpayer. Last year, 25,000 cattle were slaughtered, and almost £90 million was paid for testing and in compensation. The Environment Secretary has said that over the next 10 years, bovine TB will cost £1 billion in England alone if more action is not taken. However, it is the Government's proposed action to tackle the issue that I wish to question.

Although the compulsory culling of cattle affected by bovine TB began more than 60 years ago, it was not until the early 1970s that badgers were thought to be the wildlife reservoir for the disease. The UK has one of the densest badger populations in Europe, with up to 30 per sq km in some areas. Badgers are a native species that is widespread across the UK, and live in setts underground in family or social groups of related mature adults and young cubs. Each group defends its own territory, which has a source of food and water. They are creatures of habit and are extremely loyal to their setts. By law, they are protected under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Bern convention.

A number of badger culling initiatives have been employed over the years to control bovine TB, but it was under the Labour Government that a full scientific study was undertaken. Following Professor John Krebs's independent review, that Government set up the independent science review group, and the UK randomised badger culling trial began. The trial took place over a 10-year period in areas where there had been large numbers of TB cases in cattle. However, the cull was suspended in 2003 when it was found that survivors of partly culled setts were wandering away and spreading the disease. Following extensive research, the study reported in 2007 and concluded that badger culling could not meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB in the UK.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Is the hon. Lady not aware that there was proof after the trials that TB in cattle was reduced by some 27% as a result of culling, and that while there was, as she correctly indicated, perturbation around the edges of the area in which the cull took place, within a year that had lessened? In other words, the Krebs trials demonstrated that culling is effective. Indeed, the report of the EFRA Committee, on which the hon. Lady sits, came to that conclusion in the previous Parliament.

Mrs Glindon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but against that evidence it has been shown that the results are not as favourable in smaller experiments.

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the scientific evidence suggests that, at best, a comprehensive culling policy would lead to a 16% reduction in bovine TB, but only after nine years in the culling zones? The Government's proposal is to undertake a number of pilot projects before rolling out the programme, which is not an effective way forward.

Mrs Glindon: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and agree with her. This is the basis on which the Government are advancing their proposals—nothing better, just the same.

In 2008, the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), decided that, based on the evidence, it was not right to risk the cull because it could have made the disease worse. He stated that the then Government would concentrate on other measures, including investing in the development of an effective TB vaccine for both cattle and badgers.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I am encouraged that we are having this debate. What is the vaccine called that the hon. Lady mentioned? My understanding is that no effective vaccine is in place yet, that the trials are ongoing and that frankly, the vaccine does not exist. An injectable vaccine would be incredibly costly and difficult to administer, and would have no effect on badgers that already carry this terrible disease.

Mrs Glindon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. My understanding, from looking at the Wildlife Trust's vaccine programme in Gloucestershire, is that BCG vaccines are effective. The trust is carrying out that programme by trapping the badgers and injecting them. The trial took place over the summer and the costs are being looked at, but the programme is under way. I am no scientist, but the injections are similar to BCG injections for humans.

Ian Paisley: I appreciate the hon. Lady allowing me to intervene again on this important point. I am aware of those Gloucestershire trials, which are important. I declare an interest as a member of the British Veterinary Association, which cares about animals and their welfare. On those trials, it states that

> "to conclude from this report that the badger vaccine is a viable alternative to culling in eradicating TB is unrealistic at best and spin at worst."

The fact is that frankly, trapping a wild badger and trying to inject it and trace it for the next five years—as the hon. Lady has said, there is a large badger population—would be impossible.

Mrs Glindon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but the Government's proposals on culling are not being monitored and have no scientific fact behind them. The vaccine trials are ongoing and should be pursued. Unfortunately, the Government closed down five of the six trials, thus limiting what can be done, but they themselves are going to put £20 million into vaccine development.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): Clearly, there will be different views on a number of issues in this debate, and I welcome that. I should like, however, to clarify the situation on vaccines, so that the debate can progress on a positive, factual basis. As has been said, a licensed injectable vaccine is being used by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust. However, that is not a trial. The trust is undertaking a programme of vaccinating badgers on its own land and, as I say, is not carrying out a trial.

On the six projects to which the hon. Lady referred, yes, I cancelled five of them, but they were not trials either. They were called vaccine deployment projects and were purely designed to work out the mechanics of catching and vaccinating badgers and to train the operators. Those projects were not trials to establish whether the vaccine works; we know it works to a large extent, which is why it is licensed.

Forgive me for taking so long, Mr Crausby, but I think these points are helpful. An oral vaccine has not been developed. There have been a number of attempts to do so in New Zealand, as well as in this country, but we are still many years away from it. Just for the record, a cattle vaccine is more imminent but, as no doubt we will discuss, we have major problems with the EU in getting agreement to use it.

Mrs Glindon: I thank the Minister for his valuable intervention and for clarifying the issue. I hope his comments will be useful to the rest of the debate.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Many of us are intervening on the question of a vaccine. I am a farmer and I love wildlife. We would desperately like to have a vaccine that we felt was going to be effective, but for as long as I can remember—I have been involved with this issue for about 40 years—a vaccine has been about 10 years away. What we need from the hon. Lady is an idea of what the Opposition would genuinely do.

Mrs Glindon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which was made from his professional stance. The vaccine issue is very important, and the previous Government were totally committed to it because they appreciated the situation of the farmers and of the animals affected by this horrendous disease. That is why the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central, decided to concentrate on developing a vaccine. Such a decision was based on the scientific evidence that culling was not the way forward, and because he put faith in developing the vaccine, he set up the Bovine TB Eradication Group for England. The measures proposed by that group did not at any point include going along with culling, because it believed that the scientific evidence from 10 years of trials did not conclude that culling would bring any success.

[Mrs Glindon]

Based on the scientific findings of the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle, Labour in opposition remains opposed to a cull. The new Labour-led Assembly in Wales have put a halt to a proposed cull and are concluding a review into the scientific evidence. The coalition claim that it is

> "committed, as part of a package of measures, to develop affordable options for a carefully-managed and science-led policy of badger control in areas with high and persistent levels of bovine TB",

and that

> "the proposals are based on the best available scientific and veterinary evidence".

However, despite that claim, the Secretary of State, supported by the Minister, is proposing to allow a cull of badgers to take place.

The scientific evidence upon which the previous Labour Government based their decision not to go ahead with culling but to seek to develop successful vaccination was supported by experts and organisations such as those already mentioned—for example, the wildlife trusts and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It is also important to note that the people who made up the important group set up by the Labour Government included representatives from the Royal College of Surgeons, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and other science groups. The emphasis has always been on scientific evidence, which, as I have said, is still what the Opposition consider the best way forward. It is only through scientific evidence that any action can be taken.

Mr Gray: The hon. Lady makes great play of the scientific evidence that came before the previous Government. However, she will remember that the scientific evidence was carefully balanced and that, for example, the chief veterinary adviser to the Government came down on the side of the cull. Does she not remember that the reason why the former vegetarian Secretary of State for DEFRA came down against a cull was because he believed that the social and, dare I say, political and even economic consequences of allowing a cull would be larger than the veterinary benefits? The issue was not actually about science; it was about whether a cull was politically acceptable.

Mrs Glindon: The chief veterinary adviser based what he said on scientific evidence and his professional judgment was not swayed in the way that the hon. Gentleman has suggested.

Mr Paice: On the science, has the hon. Lady read the document on the DEFRA website that states:

> "Bovine TB - Key conclusions from the meeting of scientific experts, held at DEFRA on 4th April 2011"?

I will not read out all the names listed on that document, but there are about 10 of them, including all the scientists who were involved in the trials and in many other aspects of the matter. The science is agreed. There should be no dispute about the science; indeed, hon. Members have already discussed the science. The document that I am referring to clearly sets out the figures and refers to 16%, which has been quoted. That is the science; the issue is what conclusion is derived from it. Has she read that document?

Mrs Glindon: I have spent about 20 hours trying to read everything that I can in preparation for the debate. I have not read the specific names, but I maintain that the information that I have read on the DEFRA website and in other publications indicates that the science base against culling accepted by the previous Labour Government was right and remains so.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, at that meeting, scientists said that they were concerned about the impact of free shooting and that the effects of the policy would be to create differences "either positively or negatively"? The scientists went on to say that such an approach would lead to a

> "potential variability in outcome between areas."

Is that not the case?

Mrs Glindon: I accept what my hon. Friend has said. That is the tenet that one hears over and over again.

Ian Paisley: Does the hon. Lady accept that no one is supporting the policy of a badger free shoot, as has been suggested? We are talking about a limited cull in specific areas, not a free-for-all free shoot.

Mrs Glindon: A free shooting policy would mean badgers being shot under licence, but not in a controlled way. We are talking about free shooting at random.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Will she comment on what is, as I understand it, the Home Secretary's view on shooting and on the resources that will need to be taken from the police to deal with free shooting as a method of culling? The 20% cuts that are taking place across the country mean that that will present problems to our police forces.

Mrs Glindon: I was going to raise that issue with the Minister later. The cost of policing, which will be very contentious, is estimated at approximately £200,000 a year, which is one of the things that is not addressed in the Government's proposals. The amount of money seems to have decreased.

The Minister's proposals for controlled shooting deviate from those practised in the randomised badger culling trial. To elaborate on what I said earlier, the animals will be shot in the field at night, instead of using the accurate and humane method of caging, trapping and shooting, which was used in the trial. Badgers are difficult to approach, and they spend a lot of their time in the undergrowth. Their physiology makes it difficult for one random shot to kill them outright.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): During the 700 hours of debate on hunting in the previous Parliament, it was suggested that shooting was the humane alternative in wildlife control. Is the hon. Lady now saying that shooting is not as humane as it was when it was debated in the previous Parliament?

Mrs Glindon: I was not an MP at that time and did not follow that debate, but methods of shooting can be debated here.

Cathy Jamieson: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Government's own wildlife crime unit raised concerns about that, saying that if the culls take place there is a danger of illegal badger persecution being carried out under the pretext of culling? There is a concern as to what that will do in terms of both community safety and public order.

Mrs Glindon: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point on animal welfare and criminality, which relates to public safety as well as to the badger community.

Under the randomised badger culling trial, culling took place over a short period of two weeks. It was found that a longer period of culling saw greater effects from perturbation. Unfortunately, the Government's new proposals include a longer period of culling. Natural England has expressed concern at the lack of evidence available to demonstrate that a farm-led cull can replicate what has only been undertaken previously by Government.

The Government have designated Natural England as a licensing authority for the cull. Under the proposals, farmers and landowners will be expected to cull at least 70% of badgers in designated areas. However, there is no accurate information about the badger population, so the number to be killed cannot be specified. Without accurate data, culling could lead to extinction in some areas or, where too few badgers are killed, an increase in the negative effects of perturbation. Furthermore, it has been estimated that, as has been mentioned, the policing cost of dealing with protesters who are against the cull will amount to more than £200,000 per year, but Ministers have not specified where that amount will come from.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On the subject of cuts, a number of dairy farmers have approached me to say that the Government cuts to trading standards are having a real impact on cattle testing at market. I am sure that my hon. Friend will come on to the point that, while there is a responsibility on farmers to ensure that they are not transporting infected cattle around the country—there have been concerns about farmers swapping infected cattle and non-infected cattle—apparently there has been a decline in the effectiveness of testing at cattle markets, because trading standards are not being funded. Does she share my concern?

Mrs Glindon: Other important measures must also be upheld if we wish to curtail the incidence of bovine TB.

Mr Paice: Just for the record, so that the debate is based on facts, no testing is done at livestock markets. Let us be clear, because if we are going to debate the matter, let us base the debate on fact, not fiction.

Mrs Glindon: I thank the Minister for his intervention, but I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is representing her constituents as truthfully as she can in this debate.

Kerry McCarthy: Certainly, I have been approached by dairy farmers who are opposed to the badger cull. They have told me that they are concerned about the cuts to trading standards, which mean that cattle markets are not being supervised in the way in which they should be. I do not know whether that is specifically about testing at markets or assessing in other ways whether infected animals are being sold there, as opposed to clinical testing, but I have certainly been told—I can put this on the record—by dairy farmers who go to market every week that that is having an impact.

Mrs Glindon: I hope that the Minister has noted my hon. Friend's concerns.

The Minister and the Secretary of State should listen to the experts and the scientists and, instead of pressing forward with plans for culling, refocus their efforts to eradicate bovine TB by concentrating Government resources on developing vaccination methods, along with other measures that are currently being deployed. Other countries where bovine TB is a problem, such as New Zealand, Ireland and the USA, are all working on vaccines. The Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust has carried out vaccine trials in Gloucestershire, as has been mentioned, so momentum is growing in that direction. Culling is not the answer. Sound scientific evidence tells us that we must move in a different direction and try to work with the measures, some of which the current Government are carrying forward, put in place by the previous Government, which definitely work.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely good point, and I am very grateful to her for securing today's debate. *[Interruption.]* I wish that Government Members would not heckle, because it is so annoying. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) has mentioned dairy farmers who are, quite rightly, opposed to this and who, quite rightly, do not want culling on their land. Will my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) spend a moment addressing the issues around a free-for-all cull, where licensed guns are wandering around looking for anything black and white moving in the undergrowth? Will she spend a moment addressing what will happen when there is a dairy farmer slap bang in the middle of one of these areas who says, "No, we are not having that on my land"? How will that affect the supposedly scientific cull?

Mrs Glindon: I have spent a number of hours reading all kinds of evidence about this, and the main worry about policing and control is that there is none. Natural England will license the guns, and farmers and landowners will come together and train people to shoot, but it must be emphasised that the shooting will not be controlled as it was under the scientific trials. The problem is that the shooting might be random and that there will be no one to enforce any safety measures whatever. The badgers will be shot as they are running or moving along as badgers do in the undergrowth, but who will keep people off the target site or ensure that the shot badgers are killed outright and not wandering off in pain to die a cruel death or, if wounded, wandering away from their setts and spreading the disease?

I urge the Minister to rethink culling. The science is the route, and the science says, "Do not cull!" Will the Minister consider the vaccine route? Resources should be poured into vaccine, ensuring that farmers and badgers have an equal say and that we do not look at killing before we look at curing.

11.31 am

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Thank you for the opportunity to speak in the debate, Mr Crausby.

To provide some background, last week, at a place called Broomhill farm near where I live in Pembrokeshire, the home of my constituency agent, 11 cattle were reactors to a TB test. Shortly afterwards, it was discovered that they could not be taken away for slaughter because four of them were in-calf heifers. Therefore, those animals, bred with great care and attention by the family, had to be shot on the yard in front of the son and daughter who were aspiring to grow the farm in the way that we are all encouraging them to, and with all the accompanying trauma. We talk about compensation and, yes, of course there will be compensation for the animals concerned, but there will not be compensation for the calves within them, there will not be compensation for the reduction in the milk yield, there will not be compensation for the additional buildings that have had to be put in place over the years for handling, because of the lack of ability to move animals around, and there will not be compensation for the trauma that that family and others have been subject to over a long period.

In a sense it would be nice to be able to say to the House that that story was unusual, but the truth is, as we all know, that nothing at all about it is unusual. Everyone with a constituency affected by the disease has similar tales to tell. Frankly, there have been 60 years of discussion, 60 years of promises, 60 years of let-downs, 60 years of contradictory science and 60 years of politicians taking the farming community to the brink and then back again, as we have seen in the Welsh Assembly. The evidence was clear, the proposals and everything were in place to embrace at long last some degree of control, but what happens? There is an election. The only thing that changes is the election result and the whole thing goes back to square one. Is it any wonder that farming communities around Britain have lost faith in politicians' ability to deliver some kind of progress—I will come back to that—on the issue? Thousands of cattle have been killed, as the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) mentioned, millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been wasted, businesses have been destroyed and families broken up and farmers have left the industry, at times in droves—not solely because of the impact of the disease over so many years, but in part.

If I can bring the debate back to human beings—a little more about the human cost and a little less about the animal cost—we might be going in the right direction. Let us be honest: such an impact on any other industry in the UK and over such a long period would have been completely intolerable, but for some strange reason we have stood back and tolerated it in our farming industry, despite the human and financial costs discussed. The Government are absolutely right to draw a line and say, "Enough is enough," and to come forward with a consultation process—let us not forget that we are still in the consultation phase and that no final decisions have been taken. It is right for farmers, taxpayers, cattle, businesses and—I say to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who has now left the Chamber for the second time—badgers. It strikes me as odd that during the debate we have almost seemed to be frozen with fear at the prospect of curing a disease which itself has a negative impact on the badger population. As a constituency MP representing a rural seat a long way from Westminster, I find it frustrating that so little attention has been devoted to the welfare of badgers. We seem to forget all that. The idea that we should close our eyes and somehow badgers will live happily ever after is utterly naive and does nothing for the overall thrust of most welfarists and conservationists—as opposed to preservationists—that we should look after the health of the wild animal population as much as that of the husbanded population, and balance between them, just as we should look after those who are charged with the interests of both.

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend is familiar with scenes such as one described to me by a farmer in my constituency. When the farmer turned on the lights in the yard in the middle of the night, he saw what he thought were 30 to 40 badgers, full of TB, staggering around and unable to stand up. Those badgers could not be helped even if we had a vaccine, because they are ill badgers; they need to be destroyed, and the only sensible way to destroy them is by shooting them. My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point.

Simon Hart: It is as much a problem in North Wiltshire as in west Wales and other areas represented in the debate.

Someone said to me over the weekend, "Of course the problem isn't the disease, the problem is the policy." I have a certain sympathy with that view, formed over the years we have been studying the issue. The Minister mentioned in one of his interventions the legal stranglehold of the European Union—I do not think that you, Mr Crausby, would thank us if we went into an EU debate now, but it appears absolutely correct that the chances of us being able to introduce in the necessary time a cattle vaccination, which is effective and cost-effective, seems unlikely at this moment in the process. That leaves various other options.

As I suspect everyone is, I am rather in favour of cattle vaccination, if only it were so simple. I suspect that the Minister would agree—for no other purpose than to help his blood pressure when attending debates such as this one perhaps—if it were possible to take the problem away with a magic potion which could somehow be administered to cattle or badgers, but it is not that simple. The cattle vaccination is estimated to be only about 60% effective, even if we could start administering it tomorrow. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who spoke about badger vaccination. To be honest, I am sceptical about the practical possibilities. I live in a fairly remote part of west Wales and within a mile of my house are 20 badger setts, which are all in difficult places. They are not nicely situated in the middle of fields but are in quarries, under buildings and in the most awkward places imaginable. The idea that someone would have the wherewithal, the patience, the money, the expertise and everything else required to trap, inoculate and test or whatever frankly makes no practical sense. Of course vaccinations will form an important part of the final eradication of the disease, and the sooner the better—we can all agree on that.

One simple solution, however, is not what is on offer. We must combine testing and stricter or proper monitoring of cattle movements throughout the UK with sensible culling proposals. I am talking about culling where appropriate, under proper supervision and in line with the consultation documents supplied by the Minister. It is perfectly possible to undertake a well-controlled, humane cull in certain areas, as the Welsh Assembly demonstrated before it had the rug pulled from beneath its feet. A combination of things will lead to final eradication. People who think there is some magic pill out there which can be dished out and is cheap, effective and imminent are deluding themselves. We should take much greater notice of the evidence before us than we have so far in the debate.

I suspect that the goal for all of us is something that is easy, effective, cheap and, above, all, imminent. It is absolutely right, legally, morally and practically that the Government wish to consult on the issue, and we look forward to the final findings before too long. However, let us not underestimate—I hope that the Government will not do so—some of the practical obstacles that will present themselves, not only to vaccination, but to the controlled culling that they have set out.

Above all, the Government should not be half-hearted. They have the evidence they need. They have, if nothing else, reams and reams of human examples, which demonstrate to everyone in the House why it is so important to bring the curtain down on this appalling disease. I have been told that the badger is a political animal, and puts the frighteners on hon. Members on both sides of the House when it comes to making a bold, sensible and evidence-based decision. I suggest to the Minister that there is never a bad time to do the right thing, and now is the time to do the right thing. I commend his proposals.

11.41 am

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart). He is absolutely right that bovine TB is a terrible disease. I, too, have seen some appalling cases. To put the matter into perspective, the last figures I saw showed that 92% of farms are free of bovine TB, so it does not impact on every farm throughout the country. It comes and goes in waves.

My late father-in-law was a small farmer in Cornwall, and he was proud of the fact that there was never TB on his farm, despite it having a badger sett. He claimed that his purchasing policy when he bought in animals kept it free, but even I am not convinced that that was the case. I believe that it was the character of the surrounding area, and the fact that a wide range of farmers had high standards.

The Prime Minister told me in the Liaison Committee a few months ago that he agrees that he should spend more time with his scientific advisers, and I suggest that every Minister should do just that, but I also ask that everyone has basic lessons in how science works because the argument is not black and white. Anyone who presents it as such is wrong. The hon. Gentleman said that vaccination is not that simple. He is absolutely correct. Nothing in the debate is absolutely simple, and I will illustrate the folly of the Minister's position by using the argument that it is not that simple.

Lord Krebs, a highly respected Cross Bencher in the other place, has reported, as is well known. His view is that the process that the Minister recommends has a serious flaw, and it would be foolish to ignore that view. The question is which of the extreme views is right. I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman was arguing—my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) was certainly not—that TB in badgers should be ignored, and he was not looking for a 100% cull. We must find a way forward. The question is whether the Minister's free shooting policy can provide that way forward. My contention, based on the Krebs report, is that it cannot.

Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I apologise for being late, and I declare an interest in that I am responsible for a herd of bovine animals in Wales. That is not the Minister's responsibility because we are discussing an England-only issue, but it is a herd that has been affected by TB.

The hon. Gentleman referred to Professor Krebs's contribution, with which I agree. We must take a view on it. Does he agree that there is a balancing view from David King, a former chief scientific adviser to the Government, who carried out an overarching review of all the science, and came to a different conclusion from that of Professor Krebs?

Andrew Miller: Indeed. That is my point. The argument that the Government are relying on—that the free shooting policy will work—does not have universal support in the scientific community because, as an hon. Member who intervened on my hon. Friend said, it is not possible to measure that realistically. I am glad that colleagues from Wales have intervened, because that is hugely important. The evidence suggests that, to have any effect, a cull would have to take place over a minimum area—the suggested area is 150 sq km—and be conducted for four years. It is estimated that in the first three years, perturbation would be serious. The problem is, unless the policy is nationwide, how to manage the Welsh and Scottish borders, although I suspect that the latter is less relevant. It would be incredibly difficult to do something effective on the Welsh border. Unless we issue badgers with passports and do not allow them to cross the border, there will be a problem.

Mr Gray: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. The policy stipulates that there must be hard borders to the area to be culled. The Welsh border is a good example. Unless we give badgers money to use the toll bridges, the River Severn provides a healthy, strong border to protect Wales from Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset, which are so badly affected by bovine TB.

Andrew Miller: The hon. Gentleman is right where there are major borders, but the Welsh border is a tad longer than the River Severn. Towards my constituency, the River Dee is not the Welsh border. If we brought it back to the Welsh border, it might upset some of our Welsh colleagues. Perhaps Offa's dyke should be the border, but we have had that debate in the House. There is a serious logistical problem, especially in north Wales, in defining where the boundary would be. There would be one policy on one side of a land border, and another on the other side. The same would apply in Scotland. My first message to the Minister—he is trying to address an incredibly difficult problem—is that free shooting has a substantial weakness, unless he can obtain a

[Andrew Miller]

buy-in from his Scottish and Welsh colleagues. Otherwise, trials of a free shooting policy in those areas are bound to fail.

Ian Paisley: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman accepts that to stem the effects of perturbation, good husbandry on both sides of the Welsh or English border would require buffers to stop the movement of badgers anyway. Is his argument not defeated by the practical measures that farmers would take irrespective of what side of the border they were on?

Andrew Miller: That is the problem. The hon. Gentleman has significant knowledge of the farming industry. Badgers are fascinating creatures, because they are extremely difficult to control, in the way that would be necessary, by a buffer process. Badgers are habit-forming creatures. Those that cross my land leave a straight line through the grass, and they are so caring about others in the sett that if one goes missing, perhaps because it has been hit by a vehicle, they will go and find its body. They are extraordinary creatures and it will be difficult to create a buffer that works.

I have some sympathy with the point raised by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) about a family who see several badgers in a farm that are suffering from TB. Our humanity means that if we see a creature suffering, we must do something and I would not seek to debar the humane dispatching of a suffering animal. That, however, is not free shooting, which will inevitably take out healthy members of the badger population. The effects of perturbation will be exacerbated because badgers are communal animals and will go looking for partners and friends in new setts should their sett be destroyed. Unless one can guarantee that only those badgers carrying TB will be shot, the risk is that the disease will spread.

It is not mathematically possible to provide a guarantee to the farming community that that policy will work. The question, therefore, is whether such a policy would make any progress, but we must also look at the situation in another way. As has been said, significant work has been carried out on the Gloucester vaccine, which we know works. One would not wish to remove that vaccine where it can be utilised, although we must recognise the problems in administering it.

I think that highest priority should be given to work on the cattle vaccine, and to finding a cross-party agreement and a way to present that scientific evidence through European mechanisms and get agreement on it. One can proceed on a scientific basis, and I urge the House not to go down an extremist route. We all agree that we cannot and would not want to destroy the entire badger population, and all methods currently employed against the disease contain weaknesses. A cattle vaccine is one area that we know is likely to have the greatest success. We must invest in that research and find a cross-party way to take it through European mechanisms and find a solution that is in the interests of both the British countryside and our important farming community.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Four hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye so I appeal for short speeches from now on. I intend to call the Front-Bench speakers at 12.10 pm.

11.54 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I will try to be reasonably brief. I thank the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) for securing this debate. She pointed out that she comes from the city and is a townie, and although we work well together on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, I feel that she may be wrong on this issue. I welcome the chance to participate in the debate, however, and I welcome the Minister being here. Along with the Secretary of State, he has been brave in moving this issue forward. We have had problems with TB for 60 years or more. We began to get to grips with it in the late '60s, but as the badger population increased, so did TB, and we have had a huge problem ever since.

We are talking about disease control because we have got to stamp out TB, which exists not only in cattle and badgers but in a lot of other wildlife. Over 100 cats have suffered from it, and there is much to do to control the disease. In an ideal world we would vaccinate the badgers, but we are without an oral vaccine and we know the practicalities of such a vaccination programme—we simply would not catch them.

A vaccine for cattle is not too far away, but we must ask how long it could take and whether we will get Europe to agree to it. There was a huge debate over foot and mouth disease and whether vaccinating cattle should be allowed, and we would have the same problem with a vaccine for TB. We do not yet have an effective vaccination, and throughout Devon, Cornwall and the whole of the west country, farmers have suffered year after year from the presence of this disease. Many of the herds involved have been restricted for two, three, four, five or more years, and during that time farmers have lost a lot of their highly bred—and irreplaceable—pedigree cattle. All the while, we have done nothing to get rid of the reservoir of disease in the fields.

We test our cattle regularly, and bring them in for the winter although they are tested throughout the year. We take out the infected cattle, but then we put them back into the fields—quite rightly; the public would be horrified if we kept our cattle penned in all year round—where they get reinfected by infected badgers and other wildlife. The disease then affects more healthy cattle, and yet more are taken out. Such a situation cannot go on. The previous Government prevaricated and did nothing about it, but this Government have bitten the bullet.

We must be convinced about the cull that we suggest. It is proposed in limited areas and is likely to take place in certain hot spots. One need only look at a map such as the one I am holding to see where those hot spots exist: mainly in the west country and Wales. It was asked how many farmers will sign up to the policy, but I assure hon. Members that in TB hot spots where farmers have been suffering with the disease for years, there will be no problem in signing up to a proper cull. We are talking about controlled shooting, not free shooting, and that must be carried out by people who are properly licensed and who use proper weapons. I am hugely keen on animal welfare.

Andrew Miller: Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that in an article from 17 September 2010, the Minister said,

"my view is that free shooting would, in most cases, be by far the most effective option."

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman will find that the issue has been looked at again, and that controlled shooting is the idea being proposed. We will train people to take part in that, so that it can be done humanely. That is absolutely vital. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the comments of Lord Krebs after his trials, but many people dispute whether those trials were accurate. I believe that reducing the infected badger population will reduce the incidence of TB in cattle. There are no two ways about that; we must tackle the issue.

I will not repeat what has already been said, but I have a final point about cattle valuation. My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) spoke earlier of the problem of pedigree cattle being taken out of England that are under tabular valuation. Those over 36 months old receive less compensation than non-pedigree cattle, and many farmers in Devon have to go to markets in Somerset and compete with Welsh farmers who have received huge amounts of compensation. It is necessary to get the valuations right.

I very much support what Ministers are doing. For too long, we have wrung our hands on this issue. We must take action, and take action now.

[Mr Christopher Chope *in the Chair*]

12 noon

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) on securing this important debate. I agree with the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller) that this issue is not black and white. That is why the previous Government did not prevaricate but instigated a 10-year scientific study in order to arrive at a considered view as to how we should proceed. It made use of the most extensive scientific evidence available on the impact of culling badgers. During 10 years, the study examined the effects of culling at 10 high-risk sites across England.

The independent scientific group in charge of considering the evidence relating to the study said that it concluded that badger culling could not

"meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB in Britain."

It has to be said—apparently, it has to be said repeatedly—that we have seen to date no new evidence to contradict the views of the ISG. There have been individual scientists who may disagree, but overall there has been no other significant study—*[Interruption.]* No, I will not give way. We have to move on because other hon. Members want to speak. There has been no other study on that scale that has come up with a view contrary to the one the ISG arrived at in 2010.

As has been said, Lord Krebs was absolutely clear. He said:

"I do not think culling is an effective policy because if you look at the evidence from the trial you will see that if you cull intensively for at least four years you will have a net benefit of reducing TB in cattle of 12 to 16 per cent, so you leave 85 per cent of the problem still there having gone to a huge amount of trouble to kill a huge amount of badgers. It just does not seem to me an effective way of controlling the disease."

Indeed, Lord Krebs believes that the approach should be a combination of developing an effective long-term cattle vaccine and improving biosecurity and cattle management. That consideration has not been raised in today's debate but should be an important one in tackling TB effectively. The Minister has already conceded that we are close to developing an effective cattle vaccine. If the EU is the obstacle, let us put our resources into dealing with that, rather than into culling badgers unnecessarily.

The deputy chair of the ISG has said that the reduction in the incidence of TB as a result of culling will not offset in financial terms the cost of culling. She is of course referring to the compensation that is not paid out because of the numbers culled and the reduction in the incidence of TB. In fact, it has been estimated that the impact of culling will be just a 2.5% reduction in herd breakdowns. That is on the basis of the Government's proposal, as opposed to the rather comprehensive cull that would have to be undertaken, according to the ISG, in order for anything to be effective.

We know that the Home Secretary opposes a cull. We know, too, that the Government's wildlife crime unit has raised key concerns about the proposed cull. It said:

"If the culls take place then there is a very real danger of illegal badger persecution being carried out under the pretext of culling activity."

I was at the launch the other week of Operation Meles. The chief constable of Lincolnshire police was there, launching a campaign to reduce the incidence of the illegal killing of birds of prey and badgers. That is a major operation on the part of the unit. The chief constable made it clear that there is a real and significant link between wildlife crime and other forms of violent crime. Are we really going to see the Government give the go-ahead to an activity that could in many ways encourage those who would shoot and kill wildlife to believe that it is somehow legitimate to do so? The feeling will be, "If the Government can do it, why can't I?" That point has to be borne in mind by the Government when they make their decision.

No case has been made for a cull. Nothing has changed since the ISG reported in 2010. I shall finish by asking the Minister three key questions. First, how much will the cull cost farmers? Secondly, in the best-case scenario, each cull will reduce the incidence of TB by only 16% over 10 years. Is that the sign of an effective policy? Finally, does the Minister agree with the assessment of the Wildlife Trusts that the scientific evidence does not support the culling of badgers and that it could make things even worse by disturbing the remaining badgers, thereby spreading the disease further?

12.5 pm

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): Some of the points that I wanted to make have been made already and I shall not repeat them. I come from Somerset, which is a hot spot for bovine TB in the west country. Bovine TB is an appalling problem for farmers in both economic and social terms. I deal quite a lot with the Farm Crisis Network, which tries to relieve the stresses on the families concerned.

[Tessa Munt]

The Liberal Democrats are committed in the coalition agreement to pursuing a

> "carefully managed and science-led policy of badger control in areas with high and persistent levels of bovine tuberculosis".

I am concerned that, if successful, the badger control policy is expected to reduce incidences of bovine TB by only 16%. People have cited anything between 16% and 27%. We must ensure that robust measures are put in place to tackle the other 84% to 73%, depending on which figure is taken. Cattle controls, testing regimes and biosecurity measures, which are a crucial part of preventing the spread of the disease, are addressed in the proposals. I welcome the fact that £20 million has been set aside for continued development of a cattle vaccine and an oral badger vaccine. However, I am concerned that the approach to culling outlined in the guidance to Natural England varies significantly from the approach taken in the RBCT and is not, therefore, supported by scientific evidence. I am further concerned that it is proven that an ineffective cull increases incidences of bovine TB.

I take issue with the suggestion made in relation to the Government's proposed area for culling, which is a 7½ mile by 7½ mile patch of land—150 sq km. The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon), who started the debate, suggested that there could be 30 badgers per square kilometre. I scaled those figures up. That suggests that in the culling area that the Government propose, there would be 4,500 badgers, which I somewhat doubt. Those who are not informed and who do not live in areas where this problem is fairly severe may take a different view. The suggestion is that a 70% clearance of the badgers might therefore lead to 3,150 badgers being killed in a six-week period. I do not think that that is correct, and I am sure the Minister will have a view on it.

I live very close to the location of Secret World, which is an organisation that protects badgers. It often collects the young badgers that have been left orphaned. It might be helpful if people understood that Pauline Kidner, the lady who runs that organisation, takes care to ensure that euthanasia is carried out when badgers that she collects from around the country are found to have TB, and that she does not just automatically release all badgers back on to whatever piece of land she chooses. Fairly stringent measures are taken against diseased badgers, even by those organisations that exist to help them.

Finally, I call on the Minister and ultimately the Secretary of State to ensure that the cattle testing regime is more stringently enforced. What are the Minister's thoughts about including the removal of compensation payments for cattle where testing is overdue without just cause? Could compensation payments be tied to good biosecurity measures, with full payments being made to farmers who practise good biosecurity, and lower payments or the removal of payments being implemented for farmers who do not? Could the money saved from reduced compensation payments be used to set up a fund to make grants for capital works to farmers who wish further to improve their biosecurity measures? Could we ensure that each of the pilot schemes is carefully monitored by independent experts for their humaneness and effectiveness in achieving the required 70% reduction in the local badger population? Could any perturbation effects also be monitored? Could they be compared with those experienced in the RBCT? Finally, what are the implications of such an approach from a public safety perspective? The Secretary of State should hold—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I will have to interrupt the hon. Lady, because it has gone past 12.10.

12.10 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady's excellent peroration. This has been an excellent debate, with passionate and well-informed contributions from all sides. There is great concern on the Opposition Benches about the efficacy and utility of the badger cull envisaged and designed by the Government. I therefore congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) on securing the debate and on the eloquent manner in which she presented her case. There is definitely room in this debate for townies, as well as country folk and everybody in between, because this is a matter of national interest.

I might not be able to take interventions, because I have a series of questions for the Minister, so I apologise in advance. In the mass of statistics and counter-statistics, and arguments and counter-arguments, we must not forget the tragedy of stock destruction, including the emotional cost to farmers and their families, and hon. Members have reminded us of that. The fears and tears of those involved in stock husbandry are real, and many here, myself included, have witnessed them first hand.

Tackling this issue effectively is far more important than simply being seen to do something. Let us start where I hope we can agree: science and evidence must be the foundation when it comes to tackling this terrible disease. They are why the Opposition query the course of action the Government are embarked on, and I want to ask the Minister several key questions.

Let us start with the ISGC's 2007 report entitled "Bovine TB: The Scientific Evidence". Although we would all acknowledge that there are many considered nuances in the report, this 10-year-long, peer-reviewed, expert-led, science-based study concluded that

> "badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB."

It also noted—presciently, given the Government's current proposals—

> "we consider it likely that licensing farmers (or their appointees) to cull badgers would not only fail to achieve a beneficial effect, but would entail a substantial risk of increasing the incidence of cattle TB and spreading the disease in space, whether licences were issued to individual farmers or to groups."

That is pretty categoric.

Will the Minister therefore explain why he now so firmly disagrees with those findings and on what scientific and unarguable evidence basis he now feels something must be done, against the advice of this 10-year study? Will he clarify to Members and the country why he has taken against a view that remains the prevailing consensus among those involved in the science and the evidence? Will he explain why the ISGC has taken issue with his claim that his proposals for a cull, which use a very different methodology and different controls from the ISGC trials, would result in a 16% decrease in cattle TB? Why does he have a different figure?

It is important accurately to read into the record the ISGC's response to the consultation so that the Minister can directly and accurately respond. The ISCG says:

> "We note that Defra's prediction of a 16% overall reduction in cattle TB over a nine year period is extrapolated directly from RBCT findings. This extrapolation assumes that Defra's proposed culling method would achieve the same outcomes as those of proactive culling as conducted in the RBCT. We have repeatedly cautioned that the outcomes of the RBCT reflected the methods used, most recently noting that 'the effects described here relate only to culling as conducted in the RBCT, i.e. deployment of cage traps by highly trained staff in coordinated, large scale, simultaneous operations, repeated annually for five years and then halted'. It should not be assumed that farmer led culling, conducted primarily by shooting free ranging badgers, would achieve the same outcomes as RBCT proactive culling."

Would the Minister also care to share his observations on the clear consensus among responses to his consultation?

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Irranca-Davies: My apologies, but I am really up against time. I would love to have more time.

Will the Minister comment on the observation in the consultation document that

> "culling predominantly by shooting free-ranging badgers would result in an increase in perturbation leading to an increase in herd breakdowns. This opinion was based on the assertion that shooting free-ranging badgers would be an ineffective method of control and that in practice farmers would not carry out the systematic, sustained and simultaneous cull that the RBCT proved was necessary to have a beneficial effect…A lack of hard boundaries and a robust means of ensuring compliance with licence criteria were key weaknesses raised with the Government's preferred option"?

When the Minister answers that question, will he address the concerns of some that a lack of rigour in the methodology he prescribes under licence could actually be to the detriment of farmers and their herds? As the ISGC succinctly put it in its conclusions, it would be

> "likely that licensing farmers (or their appointees) to cull badgers would not only fail to achieve a beneficial effect, but would entail a substantial risk of increasing the incidence of cattle TB and spreading the disease in space".

What science and evidence does the Minister now have that contradicts that scientific evaluation of the increased risk of spreading the disease?

Linked to that, what assessment has the Minister made of the risk of farmers abandoning culling, especially if discouraged by an initial increase in the disease through the effects of perturbation, or as a result of farm abandonment, a change of ownership or many other scenarios? Assuming the Minister would wish to see the cull completed and would perhaps ask others to step in, what legal advice has he received on the ability to enforce a cull on privately owned land once it has commenced and been abandoned by the landowner? Would a group of farmers have to come forward collectively as a legal entity to be able to enforce a cull against the wishes, or following the withdrawal, of one of its members?

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, among others, noted the desirability of vaccination buffer zones around highly infected areas to assist in controlling the spread of the disease. It added that this

> "may require the Government to incentivise the process so as to ensure a high enough level of participation."

What assessment has the Minister made of the necessity for, and cost of, such buffer zones? He will not want to say that he will not know until we have a licence application on the table, because that would be Humphreyesque. He and his officials must have examined the need for such buffer zones and the likely cost implications, and it would be useful for Parliament to have that on the record.

Sir David King wrote an article in July, entitled "If we want dairy farms, we must cull badgers". The ISGC responded by saying that it

> "contributes little scientific insight to the debate on controlling cattle TB. Defra has proposed that badger culls be initiated and funded by farmers themselves. Having overseen a decade-long programme of independently-audited and peer-reviewed research on this topic, we caution that such culls may not deliver the anticipated reductions in cattle TB. King previously agreed with our conclusion that—because of the way culling affects badgers' ecology—only large-scale, highly coordinated, simultaneous and sustained culls could have positive impacts. Delivering and maintaining such culls would raise substantial challenges for farmers, with a risk of increasing, rather than reducing, disease incidence. Defra's own assessments suggest that participating farmers will lose more, financially, than they gain. King asserts that shooting free-ranging badgers—Defra's preferred culling method—'would be an effective and considerably cheaper alternative', but there are no empirical data on the cost or effectiveness (or indeed humaneness or safety) of controlling badgers by shooting, which has been illegal for decades. If the government decides to proceed with this untested and risky approach, it is vital that it also instigates well-designed monitoring of the consequences."

I have some sympathy with the Minister, because the issue has been long debated, and the arguments have been heated and the science disputed. There has, for instance, long been disagreement between Sir David and the ISG. When the original ISG report was published in 2007, Professor John Bourne, its lead author, noted that Sir David's response and subsequent recommendations in favour of a cull were not consistent with the scientific findings of his report but were

> "consistent with the political need to do something about it".

Why does that sound eerily familiar? Ah yes: "Something must be done. This is something. Therefore we must do it," says Jim Hacker, in "Yes Minister". It is not only animal welfare groups such as the Badger Trust and the RSPCA that demand answers; it is the general public. However, it is also on behalf of and in the best interest of farmers that I ask the Minister to answer the questions as fully and directly as possible. They need to be sure that they are not being sold a pup—a very expensive, incontinent and unruly pup that could do a lot more damage than good.

12.21 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): I shall try to answer most of the questions of the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies) and, indeed, other hon. Members. I offer apologies to any hon. Member whom I do not answer fully. However, the answers to several of the hon. Gentleman's questions are in the documents that we have published. He has asked me questions the answers to which he can discover, if he has not already read them.

[Mr James Paice]

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon). I have several times appeared before the Select Committee of which she is a member, and I recognise her commitment to the issues. She began with a superb explanation of the situation, and said that levels of TB are unacceptable, and that badgers are widespread and densely populated, which is perfectly correct. Arguably, that population density is the kernel of the problem. She referred, as other hon. Members have done, to the random badger control trials and the independent scientific group. I should emphasise, of course, that it was the previous Conservative Government who appointed Lord Krebs to look into the issue. The setting up of the trials by the Labour Government was the result of his recommendation—it happened in a cross-electoral period.

Despite the jibes of the hon. Member for Ogmore about Jim Hacker—and I remind the hon. Gentleman that he went on to be Prime Minister—I do not believe that doing nothing should be an option. The hon. Member for North Tyneside rightly referred to the comment of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that if we do not do anything, the problem will cost us £1 billion in 10 years. That is the reality, but worse than the costs is the continued spread of the disease into parts of the country where currently it does not exist. That is the fundamental issue, which has not been addressed by anyone. The hon. Lady also referred to other countries, such as New Zealand and the United States; she did not mention Australia, where the same point is true: they are all working on vaccines. However, they have all culled the wildlife that was a reservoir of the disease.

Much has been made of the issue of the science and the ISG. I am sure that time will stop me going through all the detail, but let us be clear: the figure of 16% that has been mentioned has been signed up to in the document on the Government's website. That is signed by Lord Krebs, Professor Christl Donnelly, Lord May and a number of other eminent scientists. They all agree about it. The document contains a clear statement about what happened in the cull zone. That is after nine and a half years, so, to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) about there being no new science, there is new science, because we have measurements from beyond the end of the period in question, and beyond the point when the previous Secretary of State made his decision. The new science shows that the incidence of TB in the culling zones fell by up to 34%. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) mentioned, the incidence in the perturbation ring went up, but then went down and reverted to the norm. That is the new evidence we have.

It is perfectly true, as the document states and as has been repeated today, that we are not proposing simply to replicate the ISG approach, because we propose shooting, and we propose that farmers, while not literally doing the work themselves, should be responsible for having it done. The two are variations, and some scientists suggest that what is envisaged might not be as effective, but that is why we are conducting two pilots. We have announced—although we have not made the final decision yet—our proposal to conduct two pilots, to establish effectiveness: whether it is possible to cull 70% of badgers in a six-week period; and whether it is humane. I cannot remember which hon. Member challenged me on who would check what is going on; but there will be independent monitors on site, watching badgers being shot. There will be post mortems, so we shall examine the effectiveness and humanity of what happens, and of course safety. Those are the variations from the ISG, and that is why we should seriously consider conducting two trials.

The argument keeps coming back to the science, and the science is the results from the ISG. Everything else since then is conjecture, whether from Lord Krebs, me or any hon. Member. To answer the question about empirical evidence, there is no empirical evidence—but we are trying to find it. That is why we propose two trials. Lord Krebs has no more basis for his conjectures than I do.

Huw Irranca-Davies *rose—*

Mr Paice: No, I am sorry; I cannot give way.

I must emphasise to those hon. Members who challenged on the shooting issue that shooting wildlife, whether they agree with it or not—and let us not get into the emotions of it—is a common practice. Foxes and deer are commonly shot, and the surrounding animal communities are not shot in the process.

Angela Smith *rose—*

Mr Paice: No; I am not giving way.

Secondly, we propose that badgers be attracted to a baited area where it would safe to shoot, and trained marksmen—not trained by farmers, as one hon. Member said, but trained and authenticated by external bodies—would do the shooting. There is a lot of emotion involved. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello), who has left the Chamber, spoke a diatribe of nonsense about this issue.

On perturbation, the ISG rightly based its conclusions on its studies, from which two fundamental points arose. First, we have addressed the costs issue by proposing that farmers do the work; it is up to them. The decision whether it is worth it for farmers is not for the Government to make; it is for the individual farmers. Secondly, we have clearly stipulated that we will expect those groups of farmers to tell us what they will do to minimise perturbation.

There are several issues. First, we believe that the applications will be for a much bigger area than 150 sq km and that it is more likely to be 300 sq km. That means that the perturbation zone will be proportionately smaller, which helps considerably. Secondly, we will encourage and expect farmers to bring forward hard boundaries that badgers cannot cross. They will be able to use buffer ring vaccination, if they choose to do so. As an aside, I should say that we wholly support vaccination, using the current methodology, if people want to do it.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller) made a sound speech, although I did not agree with all its conclusions, but the issue of borders is clearly dealt with. Tuberculosis is not an issue for Scotland, which does not have it. There is virtually none in the north of England; so we can forget that. The issue for Wales has been clearly set out. The document that we have already published states that if there is a zone that goes within 2 km of the border with Wales, the Welsh Environment and Countryside Department will have to be consulted. I suspect—although this should not be taken as gospel—that it is highly unlikely that a trial would happen so close to the Welsh border.

I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Tessa Munt) about biosecurity, more stringent testing and overdue testing. We propose to reduce or abandon compensation where farmers are overdue. She asked me about numbers, and I agree with her that the figures she extrapolated are well out of sync. We anticipate that about 1,000 to 1,500 badgers would be killed, as a total over the four years, for every 150 sq km area.

I suspect, Mr Chope, that I have just about run out of time to address the key issues, although I hope that I have covered them. The subject is important and I have tried to deal with it without emotion. It is easy for both sides of the debate to get emotive. If there are any points I have not covered, I ask hon. Members to write to me and I shall do my best to answer.

Steart Point

12.30 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): It is nice to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Chope, and I am sure that you will keep your hands warm.

I am grateful for the chance again to debate Steart in my constituency, although I am actually also disappointed that we are debating the matter again. In January this year, I stood, I think on this very spot, to deliver a robust speech on the shortcomings of the Environment Agency, the body responsible for many things in my constituency, including flood prevention. At the time, the agency had concluded a ridiculously expensive consultation exercise to try to convince local people of the merits of a long-term plan. It basically wanted to flood Steart peninsula and create a new habitat for visiting sea birds, and it intended to spend a shed load of public money—roughly £28 million—to do that. I believed then, as I do now, that that would be the wrong thing to do.

For a while in the aftermath of the original debate, and prompted by the common-sense attitude of the Minister, there appeared to be an outbreak of sanity and a chance for a sensible conclusion to the matter. Just a few weeks ago, the Minister kindly wrote to me and two of my colleagues who represent neighbouring constituencies—my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). He had quite rightly called in the Environment Agency to discuss the concerns about the Severn flood risk management project, of which Steart is a part. In the letter, the Minister said:

> "The Environment Agency is now reflecting on the response to its public consultations and reviewing its initial proposals".

That was a great relief to the three of us. The meaning of a review, which the Minister referred to quite clearly, is crystal clear in my book—it means a fresh look. However, just a few days later, a briefing note was sent to me directly from the agency, which seemed to completely contradict the Minister's words. It said:

> "Steart Peninsula is not a location which is under review".

The author had even underlined the word "not". That is extraordinary, and it prompts a number of serious questions about the credibility and trustworthiness of the agency.

My constituents need and want to know what is going on. I am forced to conclude that the Environment Agency is suffering from delusions of grandeur. It regards itself as guardian of the planet—we know that anyway—with its dangerous mixture of King Canute and old mother nature, pushing back the tide and issuing pompous decrees all the time. It is, as the Minister knows, unelected, untouchable and, in many cases, unloved. It does not seem to take any notice of Ministers, and I am afraid that it is not just the Minister here, but former Ministers. Perhaps it has a hotline to God? I do not know. It certainly has a hotline to Brussels, which of course you, Mr Chope, are a fan of. Brussels has vested it with enormous legal powers to flood perfectly good land. The agency behaves rather like Judge Solomon. It thinks that if natural coastal erosion is to be stopped in one place, territorial sacrifices must be made in another, and it decides whose fields go under water.

[Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger]

What worries me more than anything is the methods that the agency uses. The plan to flood Steart is not new—it has been on the cards for well over a decade—and the agency has got thus far by a relentless drip, drip, drip process. For nine years, it has argued that Steart should be returned to the sea. It operates on the principle that if it keeps saying the same thing, sooner or later someone will believe it.

Hon. Members may be surprised to learn that the Environment Agency is also a fearsome land-grabber, quite capable—I say this advisedly—of using dirty tricks on unsuspecting victims. Several years ago, the agency started buying up real estate in and around Steart, which is fair enough. One farmer was approached and warned that if he did not sell up straight away, there would be a compulsory purchase order later. That has now gone from one farmer to a few farmers. In my book, that is sharp practice, bordering on—again, I say this advisedly—blackmail. At the time, the plans were not even finalised and there had not been proper consultation. Yet the agency made threats and bought people out at a fraction of even today's prices. I only wish that those people had approached me, as their MP, before they signed up.

I have never seen a compelling scientific argument for flooding Steart, and I doubt whether one exists. The agency makes all sorts of woolly comparisons with how the coast is being protected on the Welsh side of the Severn estuary to justify letting in the tide to do its worst beyond Otterhampton and Stockland. It calls that approach "realigning defences", which in Steart's case means not bothering to defend anything. I fear that the Steart peninsula has been picked because it is under-populated, low-lying and has a history of getting wet. It is the sort of place that the agency thinks that it can get away with quietly drowning. Well, we have some news for the Environment Agency, because Steart is not going under without a struggle.

There is another player in this strange tale of mystery, myths and half-truths, which is the Bristol Port Company. Bristol is 40 miles north of Steart, but the firm that runs the port is now pouring cash into Steart, and one might be forgiven for wondering why. The port has big ambitions. It wants to attract huge container vessels, and it needs to build a deep-water terminal to load and unload them—there are no problems there. However, the Bristol Port Company has had an eye on European law and directives. It will need to remove a section of the Severn estuary coastline, which the law says must be replaced by flooding some other unsuspecting place. Therefore, the Bristol Port Company rolled into Steart, with —I say this openly—cheesy grins and cheque books at the ready.

The Environment Agency did not mind, because having the company on board seemed to help its case a little. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Wetlands Trust, and even Natural England jumped on board, promising a brave new world for Bristol's homeless buff-breasted sandpipers. "Come to sunny Steart," they squawked. "All you need is a beak and a few feathers."

Unfortunately, locally, the argument does not hold much water. The Bristol Port Company may have secured planning permission to dig up the sea shore for its new deep-water terminal, but it has not raised the vast sums of money needed to pay for the work. The company does not own Bristol port, but leases it from the city council. Do not tell anyone here, but now is not a good time for raising capital on the scale the company is going to need. Most investors require a firm guarantee of returns, and a leased port is not good.

There is a clear question mark hanging over the new development. If that question mark remains in Bristol, there must be serious questions about Steart, too. The case for flooding Steart depends on scientific evidence, which the Environment Agency cannot produce, and on the loss of a wetland habitat in Bristol, which has not been lost, because the container port will be built on a man-made structure. In other words, the Steart flood plan is based on protecting birds that have not been evicted at all.

I have two words for the Environment Agency and the Bristol Port company: get busted, the pair of them. If Steart were flooded, it would drive away rare, large birds. The great bustard is one of our locals. The birds were once hunted—we were talking about badgers just now—to the point of extinction and were reintroduced only seven years ago. Now there are bustards that winter on the Somerset levels and drop in and out of Steart from time to time.

The Environment Agency believes that it has a legal obligation to flood Steart because of coastal erosion elsewhere. The only thing that the Steart plan has in its favour is the fact that it has been dressed up to look like a plan—and a bad one at that. The agency admits:

> "Without this scheme we will not be able to develop measures to manage flood risk to people and property elsewhere around the Severn Estuary."

In other words, it will be up the Parrett without a paddle if it does not flood Steart. However, I find it hard to believe that there are no viable alternatives, which brings me back to where I began. The Minister believes that the agency is reviewing its plans, but the agency believes that it is doing no such thing—certainly not with Steart.

There is a worrying lack of clarity, which I gently urge the Minister to address. The Environment Agency and the Bristol Port Company intend to apply to the district councils of Sedgemoor and West Somerset for permission to flood Steart. We already know that the Agency intends to spend roughly £28 million on its share of the operation. Remember, we are talking about public money here, and this is at a time when all other public money is rightly subject to the most clinical accounting procedures. Why on earth has the agency escaped the axe on this proposal? The scale of expenditure is far too high at a time when the nation is feeling the pinch.

Somerset is already losing libraries, and some of my local schools really need refurbishing, which we cannot do. We also urgently need a new hospital and a road to take construction traffic to Hinkley Point, which is our nuclear power station. I am sure that this is not the right moment to embark on flooding Steart.

I also invite the Minister to address the subject of planning gain. That is part and parcel of the planning process in which authorities such as the Environment Agency are obliged to provide compensation to communities. What will local people get out of the scheme? The agency has said:

> "Creating wetland habitats will provide benefits, not only for people who live on the peninsula but also for birds, fish and other wildlife."

Such a twee vision would have made more sense coming from the lips of Tinky Winky, Dipsy, La-La or Po. The agency, which trots out such drivel, is meant to be staffed by experts. In reality, the only thing that Steart will get out of the flood plan is a huge pile of bird droppings and, hopefully, an invasion of twitchers.

The Environment Agency has bullied landowners and it is now contradicting the Minister. Its reputation in my constituency is not good at the best of times. The danger is that some of the mud will rub off on my hon. Friend the Minister, because there is an enormous amount of misunderstanding. I invite the Minister to think about his response. Many people in my constituency are worried about where this will end. I ask him to clarify what is happening at Steart peninsula. Both the Environment Agency and the Bristol Port Company should be aware of what the Government want rather than the Environment Agency just telling us what is going to happen.

12.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on securing another debate and on making a number of good points.

The Steart scheme is an essential project with many positive points. I have to tell my hon. Friend that I have looked at the matter from every angle and I believe it to be the only viable way in which the Government can continue to provide defences and secure access to the village while also meeting our environmental objectives for the estuary.

The Severn estuary is an important wildlife area as well as a great economic asset. It has more than 200 km of coastal defences, which will provide, over time, benefits in excess of £5 billion to more than 100,000 residential and commercial properties. The shoreline management plan highlights the need to maintain and improve most of the defences. However, as a consequence of that there will be a substantial loss of internationally designated inter-tidal habitat.

Our investment prioritisation process is focused principally on protecting people and property and that is where the vast majority of our money is spent. However, we also have obligations under the EU habitats directive to maintain or restore natural habitats and the population of species of wild fauna and flora at a favourable conservation status. Together with the birds directive, it is a key element in the EU's commitment to halt the loss of biodiversity within the EU by 2020.

Despite the impact on the natural environment, we will continue to invest in the defence of the Severn estuary. There is clearly an imperative reason to do so. Such work is permitted under the habitats directive as long as appropriate compensatory habitat is secured. Our plans to manage and improve the defences depend on sufficient compensatory habitat being secured before the protected habitat is lost due to flood defence construction works. There has already been a loss in the Severn estuary and, without the Steart scheme, such losses mean we are failing to maintain the integrity of the protected Natura 2000 site.

The Environment Agency has consulted on the Severn estuary flood risk management strategy and, in the light of the responses received together with the latest scientific advice on climate change, it has decided to review the initial proposals within the strategy—that was the point of the letter to my hon. Friend. That was a response to the very serious and genuine concerns that have been raised not just in his neighbourhood but right up the Severn estuary. I urge him to look at the difference between that macro policy and the micro issue that exists around the Steart. The scheme has been in development for three years, and has involved the local community throughout its development. It is not part of the review of the wider strategy, because it is needed urgently and it has strong local support. Beyond the short term, it is unlikely to be economically viable or sustainable to maintain the existing defences for Steart, which are in poor condition. To do so would cost in the region of £1 million per property. Therefore, it is of benefit to the local community if this project is implemented as soon as possible.

I have received many letters from people in the area in support of the scheme. Mr Barry Leathwood, the chair of Otterhampton parish council, said:

> "The Agency has consulted extensively with the Otterhampton Parish Council which includes the villages of Combwich, Otterhampton and Steart and also with the various individuals and organisations in the area for a prolonged period of time. The project is overwhelmingly supported by the residents and this Council. It is our wish that the project be developed without delay."

Andrew Darch of Brufords farm, Steart, said:

> "Although under the EA's proposals there is a large amount of agricultural land that will be converted to saltmarsh, this farmland would become very vulnerable to regular flooding without the schemes, devaluing the land considerably."

I have also heard from Mike Caswell. He said:

> "The consultation work carried out by the two companies"—

the Environment Agency and the Bristol Port Company—

> "has been first class and they have always, without fail, responded to a request for a meeting with either groups or single individuals."

I have seen letters to the local press from Dr Phillip Edwards, the chair of the Steart residents' group, and from Otterhampton parish council. There seems to be a head of steam from local people who want this scheme to go ahead. There may be others who do not. Clearly, my hon. Friend sees dark forces at play. He sees the Environment Agency acting as the malign and evil arm of some secret service from the European Union making life miserable for his constituents, but that is not a view that is shared by the majority of his constituents—or at least by the ones who have written to me or to his local press.

I want to unravel the concerns of my hon. Friend. Undoubtedly, there is a problem here. The scheme is not about flooding the area, although that may happen over time with rising sea levels. The land has been purchased by the Environment Agency. If I were to put a blue pencil through the whole scheme, as my hon. Friend wants me to do, we would have to find new buyers for the land, which would be at some cost to the taxpayer. This is a good scheme that has been consulted on and carried through and I am at a loss to know why my hon. Friend continues with this concern.

The shoreline management plan has considered the issue and highlighted the Steart peninsula as somewhere where the managed realignment of the defence provides

[Richard Benyon]

the best option for continuing to protect the village and its access as well as creating habitat to offset the environmental impact of flood defence work elsewhere in the estuary. Indeed, Steart has been identified as the most cost-effective place in the estuary for habitat creation without causing geomorphological side effects, such as adjacent erosion. That is a major factor.

The twin objectives of the Steart scheme are, first, to create habitat and, secondly and very importantly, to protect the village of Steart and its access. The scheme forms a vital part of an integrated and sustainable coastal management solution for the Severn estuary. It will provide the only foreseeable opportunity to improve flood protection to Steart Drove, which is the only access route to Steart village. It will also help to maintain the existing standard of protection, and the new defences can be expected to last far longer than the current defences.

The Steart scheme combines the creation of a substantial area of compensatory habitat in the most cost-effective way with better flood defence for the community. These factors make the scheme an integral part of whatever decisions are taken on the wider Severn estuary flood risk management strategy, which as my hon. Friend knows is under review. That is why the Steart scheme cannot be taken as part of that review. I hope that I have helped to clarify for my hon. Friend the importance of managing flood risk in a way that not only protects people and property, and delivers good value for money to the taxpayer, but meets our environmental obligations.

I am quite well aware of the concerns of many hon. Members—indeed, I share them—when directives that are created many miles from here impact on people's lives at a very local level. I can assure my hon. Friend that I do not take lying down the words of directives. If I can find a way around them, because I feel that they are having a malign effect on the taxpayer or on his constituents or my own, I will take a very robust view on that. However, in this case I believe that the scheme is in the best interests of the people who live in Steart and of the wider estuary. I also believe that it has been properly consulted on and has local support. Therefore, I hope that we can now progress the scheme and that my hon. Friend's constituents can be reassured that those people who live in Steart have a future, that their access to their community will not be cut off and that we are carrying through a scheme that they have been consulted on and that they fully understand. Our emphasis has always been that we must work with nature, wherever possible, to reduce the risks to people, while also meeting social and environmental objectives.

I can find no evidence that the Environment Agency has threatened people or behaved in a way other than the normal consultative process involved in trying to find a willing agreement to sell land. The threat of compulsory purchase is just not part of how the agency does business. The agency does not resort to compulsory purchase unless it cannot establish who a particular landowner is. Its purpose is to reach agreement and to reach a price that should reflect market conditions. If a compulsory purchase has to be made, the price is calculated by the district valuer and it has to be a market value at the time. If people feel that the price that they negotiated with the Environment Agency was wrong, they can find a market value. I understand that in this scheme that market value was achieved.

I hope that we can put this matter to bed now and that the Steart scheme can go ahead.

12.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Renovation of Empty Property (VAT)

1 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope.

I wanted to secure this debate because of the pressure to build on the green spaces and the green belt in Sefton and elsewhere. Sefton council is consulting on its core strategy and, using the figures in the regional spatial strategy, it says it needs 480 new homes each year. To achieve that target, the council has suggested three options, two of which imply significant incursion into the green belt. The draft national planning policy framework does not continue the brownfield-first policy, and councils are not allowed to include windfall development sites, such as the Maghull prison site in my constituency, which would deliver several hundred homes. In addition, empty homes cannot be counted towards a council's target, and so the 6,000 such properties across Sefton are not included in the figures. All that means that councils need an alternative strategy for building the homes that we—especially our young people—need. Affordable housing is in such short supply. A sustainable policy is needed, and a cut in VAT on the renovation and refurbishment of empty properties would contribute significantly to delivering the housing targets at the same time as protecting the green belt and important urban green space.

The VAT regime perversely incentivises new build on greenfield land because it attracts 0% VAT. A cut in VAT to 5% on the renovation and reuse of existing buildings would allow greater emphasis to be placed on urban regeneration, on which VAT is levied at 20%. The "Cut the VAT" campaign has a wide coalition of support; it is run by the Federation of Master Builders and supported by many organisations, including the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England and the Federation of Small Businesses. There would be many benefits to reducing VAT on building repairs and conversions, and there are strong environmental, economic and social grounds for doing so. In general, subjecting repairs and conversions to VAT is damaging, because it acts as a deterrent to urban regeneration, the proper maintenance of buildings and our caring for the historic environment.

The differential between VAT rates on new build and on repair creates a perverse incentive to leave properties in a state of disrepair or to demolish sound buildings, rather than encouraging their effective use and maintenance. The differential adds to the cost of bringing buildings back into use through repair, renovation or conversion, and contributes to a cycle of decline, because run-down areas are generally a less attractive proposition for investors and developers, even though they might present significant opportunities. I believe that the Government would agree with that analysis. I am looking for the Economic Secretary to nod—she is not doing so.

The additional cost that VAT adds to repairs and refurbishment distorts the market in favour of new build over reuse and refurbishment, which means that developers are incentivised to bring forward new development on greenfield sites before attempting to bring existing resources back into useful occupation. As well as assisting regeneration, making productive use of existing buildings can play an important role in conserving scarce resources such as the land, energy and building materials bound up in the properties, and such an approach also contributes to reducing waste. Government statistics indicate that there are more than 750,000 empty houses in England, and there are many other empty and underused buildings. That is an enormous waste of resources, and a reduction in VAT on refurbishment to create a level playing field between refurbishment and new build would, therefore, make a lot of sense.

Historically, it has been argued that a VAT reduction is not possible because of EU laws. However, the European Commission's Economic and Financial Affairs Council agreed in March 2009 to allow member states to reduce VAT on housing repair and maintenance, so that barrier appears to have been lifted. The cut in VAT on renovation is now an option that would promote regeneration, bring empty buildings back into use and minimise the use of greenfield land.

Turning to the impact on the construction industry, a VAT cut from 20% to 5% would reduce rogue traders' competitive advantage and help rescue many legitimate local firms from the brink of collapse. Dozens of small and medium-sized businesses would benefit considerably from a VAT cut on home repair, maintenance and improvement work, and that is why the campaign I mentioned has the support of the Federation of Master Builders. Given these tough economic times, a cut would make a huge difference to many small firms, certainly in constituencies such as mine. It would also make important home repairs more affordable, and help protect consumers from cowboy builders who currently flourish by evading VAT. It is a logical step to help boost the economy, and I call on the Government to take it as a matter of urgency.

The UK economy is facing a weak recovery from the recent recession. Output in the construction industry shrank faster than the economy as a whole during the recession, and recent forecasts suggest there will be no significant sign of recovery in the industry until 2014. Successful trials in a number of EU countries strongly suggest that a cut in VAT on home repair and improvement work would reap economic benefits for the UK. Independent research by Experian, based on a standard VAT rate of 17.5%, suggests that the total stimulus effect of reducing VAT in the sector would be in the region of £1.4 billion in the first year alone.

According to the Office for National Statistics, 249,000 work force jobs have been lost in the construction sector alone since 2007, and that has had a big effect on the Government's finances as well as a considerable human impact. We know from independent research that a cut in VAT on home repair and improvement work would create thousands of new jobs in the construction sector and the wider economy. Again, independent Experian research based on a standard VAT rate of 17.5% suggests that 24,200 extra construction jobs could be created in the first year alone if VAT on home improvements was cut to 5%. According to the same research, such growth in the construction industry would also lead to 31,000 new jobs in the wider economy.

Those significant job losses—249,000—risk creating a major skills shortage in future years, unless the industry can recruit and train sufficient numbers of people now. The number of construction apprenticeship starts fell by 4,010 between 2008-09 and 2009-10. Almost 1 million people under the age of 25 are currently unemployed, but when the construction industry returns to more sustainable levels of growth there will not be a sufficient

[Bill Esterson]

number of people equipped with the right skills to meet demand. It will be difficult for employers to make more apprenticeship places available unless there is an increase in construction activity.

We are building fewer than half the number of new homes needed to match the rate of household growth in the UK, and it is therefore shocking that there are up to 750,000 empty homes. Many of those homes require considerable repair work before they can be lived in, and the high rate of VAT makes that a very costly activity for private owners, landlords and local authorities, who could otherwise renovate more existing properties to help ease the pressure on housing supply. Making home repair and improvement work more affordable would encourage the use of existing structures, rather than continuing the urban sprawl and the possible building on green belt land.

Existing homes contribute about 27% of the UK's total CO_2 emissions, and there is a vast amount of work to be done if the UK is to meet the legally binding emission-reduction targets. A simple, single cut in VAT on home repair and maintenance work would help millions of households to upgrade their homes and make them more energy efficient. Without help to reduce energy use, the number of households living in fuel poverty will continue to grow, as they struggle to protect themselves against rising fuel prices.

According to trading standards organisations, rogue traders steal a staggering £170 million each year from unsuspecting home owners across Britain, and cause significant damage to law-abiding businesses. Rogue traders flourish by evading VAT in order to offer a cheap deal. However, all too often, the deal comes without a proper written contract or any kind of paperwork, making the enforcement of consumer rights almost impossible if something goes wrong.

Again, a simple, single action to cut VAT to 5% on home repair and improvement work would protect consumers and legitimate businesses by significantly reducing rogue traders' competitive advantage. By charging 20% VAT on all home repair, maintenance and improvement work, the Government are exacerbating numerous serious social, economic and environmental problems. Introducing a reduced rate of VAT for all home repair and improvement work is a simple plan to relieve the country of many of those problems.

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): May I give our newest Minister a warm welcome from the Chair?

1.10 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Chloe Smith): Thank you, Mr Chope. I am grateful for your warm welcome. I thank the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for securing this debate. I acknowledge some of the good arguments that he made, but I believe that his proposal is not the right tool for achieving economic growth. I shall deal with some of his specific points, including a note on apprenticeships, a little on energy supply and some remarks on green opportunities for householders.

The hon. Gentleman made some sensible arguments regarding the reuse of empty properties. Of course, we would all like existing housing stock to be put to good use; I know that from my constituency, as I am confident he does from his. He also made good points about the need in the current economic situation to support small businesses as best we can, and about evasion. I shall come to those points, but I will begin with a few words about the Government's policy on empty property in the round before discussing the specifics of how VAT applies to empty property. I reassure you, Mr Chope, before I veer anywhere near being off-subject, that tackling the country's 700,000 empty homes is a priority for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, as promoting growth and apprenticeships are for all my other colleagues.

The hon. Gentleman will know that in this year's Budget, the Government announced £180 million for up to 50,000 additional apprenticeship places over the next four years. That is real action, and I am sure that hon. Members agree that it will meet some of the concerns raised in this debate.

On 20 September this year, the Department for Communities and Local Government announced more powers for community groups to bring empty homes back into use. Community and voluntary organisations will be able to bid for a share of £100 million in Government funding to pioneer housing schemes to help ensure that empty properties are lived in again. That will also help to provide more affordable housing, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman welcomes.

Bill Esterson: I welcome the Minister to her role. I do not know whether this is the first debate that she has responded to, but I congratulate her on her appointment. She mentioned the £100 million available to community groups. How many homes are expected to be brought back into use as a result?

Miss Smith: I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman receives a specific figure, as I do not have it with me. However, as I will discuss—this goes straight to the heart of the issue—incentives also exist for councils to bring empty homes back into use by including them in the new homes bonus, which he will know about. I think this figure will reassure him: after just one year of the new homes bonus, 16,000 previously empty properties have been brought back into use.

The Department for Communities and Local Government will also consult in due course on plans to allow local councils further discretion to introduce a council tax premium on homes in their area that have been empty for more than two years. That will provide a stronger incentive to get those homes back into productive use—an aim I am sure the hon. Gentleman and I share, as do other colleagues—and remove that blight on local neighbourhoods.

It might be helpful to the hon. Gentleman if I explain how VAT applies to empty property. He might be unaware of some reliefs that go a significant way towards meeting the demands of the "Cut the VAT" campaign. The VAT system already provides for numerous reliefs from the standard rate of VAT, as he will know, but some reliefs particularly encourage new housing supply and the bringing of empty properties back into use as homes. The first sale of a new domestic property is zero-rated for VAT, as are most supplies of goods and services used in the construction of a new build, as he acknowledged. However, he might not be aware that the renovation or alteration of residential premises that have not been lived in for two years benefits from a 5% reduction in the rate of VAT. He mentioned European constraints. The 5% reduced rate of VAT exists, and is the minimum available, under long-standing EU VAT legislation. The reduced rate also applies when properties are converted from non-residential to residential, and when the occupancy of existing residential property is increased.

Wide relief already exists for the renovation and conversion of empty properties. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that that goes some way towards meeting the valid concerns that he raised about the homes in which his constituents might live. He might not be aware that the "Cut the VAT" campaign's report makes it clear as early as page 5 that

> "the many and varied exceptions that exist within the housing RM&I VAT regime...can easily lead to confusion as to what attracts VAT at the standard rate and what attracts a reduced rate."

The report goes on to provide a helpful table summarising the available reduced rates, including for

> "Renovation or alteration of empty residential premises".

I know that the hon. Gentleman is a keen supporter of the campaign, as are those on the Opposition Front Bench. For the most part, the VAT reduction for which he asks specifically for the renovation and refurbishment of empty homes is already available.

Bill Esterson: I am aware of those points. I have a copy of the campaign document, as does the Minister. Is she also aware of the Prime Minister's commitment to the Federation of Master Builders? He agreed to write to Treasury Ministers to consider the case for cutting VAT on home repair and improvement work. Does she know whether he has done so, whether he has received the response and what it might be?

Miss Smith: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I have just spent my first two days at No. 1 Horse Guards. I shall of course ascertain the location of that letter. However, I will suggest a few things that I have absolutely no doubt the Prime Minister will bear in mind as he considers the issue.

Wider VAT reduction risks a serious impact on public finances. I know the hon. Gentleman will be aware of that, despite some of the comments that he made this morning to the *Formby Times*. For example, if the rate of VAT on residential property renovation and refurbishment were reduced to 5%, it would cost £2.2 billion in the first year alone. If the rate were reduced for five years, it would cost £2.4 billion each year. If it continued for a decade, the cost to the Exchequer—to his constituents and mine—would rise to £2.9 billion for every year of that period. To put those figures in context, that would cost more annually than the entire budget for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and double the budget for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport

I therefore do not accept the claim that cutting the VAT rate for the home improvement sector would lead to a net increase in jobs across the economy as a whole or pay for itself over several years. Although the impact could be positive, we know the real likely impact. If we made such a cut, the revenue shortfall would have to be met from additional taxation elsewhere, which would lead to job losses that would offset any job gains in the building sector. Alternatively, we would need to meet the cost through additional borrowing, which would risk increasing interest rates. As the hon. Gentleman will know, higher interest rates would have an adverse impact on families and small businesses, including businesses in the building sector. I am afraid that there is no such thing as a free pass without effects elsewhere in the economy.

The Government want to provide support across the entire economy for businesses and households.

Bill Esterson: I had anticipated the Minister's comments, because this morning I received a written answer from her colleague, the Exchequer Secretary. I understand the Treasury analysis, but the answer mentions

> "in the absence of behavioural change".

Such behavioural change would include the impact on cowboy builders and the economic benefits of people spending money in the sector and being able to afford home improvements, so there is a balance. I also mentioned earlier the £1.4 billion impact on the economy that Experian anticipated under the old VAT regime. Will the Minister comment, either today or in due course, on the assessment of the impact of behavioural change, and not just of the figures that she has quoted in isolation?

Miss Smith: Let me first deal with behavioural change in relation to rogue trading, because it is important to put this on the record. I do not accept that a reduced rate of VAT would suddenly cause the illegitimate trade to become honest. I do not believe that behaviour changes in that sense—5% can be as attractive, in many ways, as 20% to a crook. There are many other factors—this is key—beside cost that cause a customer to use the informal economy, and a trader to operate in it. It is unlikely that a reduction in the rate of VAT, which is only one factor, would have an impact on rogue trading and purchasing.

On the wider point of evasion, the hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is investing £900 million to tackle avoidance and evasion and attacks by organised criminals, and that relates to the construction industry. A reduction of the VAT rate alone would not create a level playing field between legitimate businesses and those operating in the informal economy. I fear that his concerns about behavioural change, in that sense, do not go to the heart of the matter.

I will be happy to come back to the hon. Gentleman on the specifics of the Experian report. I am afraid I do not have the figures to hand, so I cannot respond on the spot.

To return to the points that we need to take into account in the wider economy, we need to be aware that households face difficult times. That is exactly why, only yesterday, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change met energy suppliers to discuss how to bring down customers' energy bills. It is also why this Government have increased the personal allowance, cut fuel duty and will reduce corporation tax year on year, which will assist businesses, including those that have signed up to the "Cut the VAT" campaign.

It is important that the Government continue to explore their options for credit easing, with which the hon. Gentleman will no doubt be familiar. We should try to inject money directly into parts of the economy

[Miss Chloe Smith]

that need it, especially small businesses, which are the driving force for economic growth.

Doing those things will not only boost demand in the short term and, indeed, change behaviour, but help to tackle long-standing UK problems associated with the supply of credit to small and medium-sized businesses. That is vital. The Chancellor will announce further details on 29 November.

To finish on the broader point, Labour, I am afraid to say, may have been content to spend beyond its means, but such costs are unsupportable in the current economic climate and simply cannot be reasonably entertained. We need sound public finances to make sustainable growth possible. Over the past decade there has been an increasing reliance on an imbalanced economy, which drove ever greater problems throughout. That model has proved unsustainable and what we have needed in the meantime, as set out in the Budget 2010, the spending review and other work, is a credible plan to tackle the unprecedented deficit that the Government inherited—and that the hon. Gentleman, no doubt, is about to jump to his feet to defend.

Bill Esterson: Until 2008 and the financial crisis, the Conservative party in opposition supported the spending levels of the then Government. It was the financial crisis and the bail-out of the banks that caused the deficit to grow to the level it reached. On the balance between quantitative easing and proposals such as the "Cut the VAT" campaign, which has the support of 49 business organisations, many prominent and highly regarded economists think the latter a far more direct way to get money into the economy to stimulate growth and demand, which I know the Government are in favour of. If we disagree on the means, we certainly agree on the need to do it, whether that be via quantitative easing or cuts to VAT on home improvements. We need to take either one action or the other. I hope the Minister will acknowledge that economists have strong views that such VAT cuts are another way of addressing the issue.

Miss Smith: I shall say three things in response. First, on the argument for such a VAT cut, many different sectors make the same argument for their own cuts. It is not clear why this particular cut is the one that should triumph, even if money was available. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman may think that this Government have gone off plan, but his shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls), is already £27 billion off the Darling plan this year alone, and the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Mr Darling) has already stated that anyone without a credible economic policy is simply not at the races. Thirdly, our approach to building a credible economy via a credible plan to tackle the deficit has been endorsed, as the hon. Gentleman will know, by the International Monetary Fund, the OECD, the European Commission, the rating agencies and UK business organisations beyond those that deal in installing bathrooms. The difficult decisions that this Government have had to take have made Britain a safe haven in the sovereign debt storm, and that is exactly what we intend to carry on being.

Of course, there are concerning signs. I acknowledge that the recent employment statistics make very tempting calls such as the hon. Gentleman's on behalf of the construction industry. Those signs, however, show more than ever why the UK must stick to its course. We need stability and confidence in the economy, and we need to hold down the costs of borrowing for businesses and home owners.

The hon. Gentleman's plan risks putting Britain back in the firing line. It could lead to rising interest rates and falling international confidence, which would undermine the recovery in his constituency, the country and internationally. In that context of a recovering economy, fiscal consolidation is what is most important, not only to ensure stability but to provide the conditions for the private sector growth that we all seek. It needs to provide the conditions for investment and hiring. Any suggestion of cuts to VAT for the construction or any other industry, or of extensions such as that proposed by the hon. Gentleman, on top of the relief that already exists to tackle his concerns, adds up, I am afraid, to calling for the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Bomber Command (Campaign Medal)

1.28 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I called for this debate because we are approaching that time of year when we remember and honour those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in defending our freedoms and liberty. I also wish to pay my own personal tribute to the contribution made to that freedom by Bomber Command. I pay tribute in particular to my constituents Stan Franks, Jack McCorkell and Jim Gooding—all veterans of Bomber Command, all stalwarts of the Grays RAF Association club, all now in their 80s, and all teenagers when they risked their lives defending our freedoms. The contribution of Bomber Command was significant, and the bravery of its members was crucial in bringing the second world war to an end. The failure to recognise that contribution with a dedicated campaign medal is a snub, and it is a snub that they feel personally.

Although many years have passed—obviously, I cannot hold the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Mr Robathan) responsible for decisions taken many years ago—it is not too late to celebrate and recognise their contribution, just as we remember the fallen every Armistice day. The Minister will be aware that a memorial to Bomber Command is under construction. Will the Government consider whether completion of that memorial offers an opportunity to right this wrong and for the Minister to consider what we can do to recognise the contribution that Bomber Command made and honour those brave pilots who are still with us?

To make the case for this honour, I would like to remind hon. Members of a few facts that illustrate the very real contribution that Bomber Command made to victory in the second world war. For example, in 1940, Bomber Command played a pivotal role in the evacuation of Dunkirk, allowing the escape of 218,000 British troops. Although Fighter Command was at the forefront of the battle of Britain, Bomber Command also played its part by taking the fight to Germany and preventing German bombers from ever arriving here. While the battle of Britain raged and RAF Fighter Command fought off the Luftwaffe, Bomber Command repeatedly attacked the advance of German troops and German shipping. However, its contribution to the battle of Britain still goes uncelebrated because the pilots from Bomber Command are not eligible for the battle of Britain Bar.

In the closing days of the war, Bomber Command's raids ensured that Germany was unable to strike terror campaigns against mainland Britain and that ultimately victory was secured. It was then that Bomber Command's contribution seems to have been sidelined, if not ignored. In the spirit of celebrating peace, the then Government chose not to celebrate Bomber Command's contribution, which was a decision that I believe was wrong.

It has been suggested that to celebrate Bomber Command's role is to condone the civilian casualties that ensued as part of its raids. However, that is to ignore the fact that we were at war. Awful things happen during war. Many people in this country were killed in the blitz, so to fail to recognise the contribution of these pilots is to diminish their courage and loyalty to a country that they risked their lives to save. The risk to life was very real. On just one night during the battle of Britain—13 August 1940—82 squadron was sent on an operation to occupied Holland. Of the 12 Blenheims sent on that mission, only one returned. That was not unusual. Of the 125,000 men and women in Bomber Command, 55,573 lost their lives. More than 10,000 aircraft were lost. A further 11,000 men were made prisoners of war. Those figures are even more remarkable when we consider that Bomber Command was made up of all volunteers who had an average age of just 22.

It is clear that we owe those people a great deal and I am pleased that work has finally commenced on the memorial, which has been funded by private donations, including a very generous donation by the Bee Gee, Robin Gibb. He is currently undergoing hospital treatment and I am sure we would all like to wish him well. When the memorial opens next year, we should take the opportunity to honour the 3,000 bombers who are still with us as a way of honouring the 55,000 who never came back and right the wrong committed by our previous political leaders. The real point is that the decision to bomb was made at a political level. As early as July 1940, for example, Churchill wrote to the Minister responsible for aircraft production, urging him to increase the production of bombers as it was the only means of defeating German military power. That decision was also supported by Roosevelt. The reality is that air power offered the only military means of striking back.

Some might say that too many years have passed since that decision was taken to reconsider the matter, but I would like to remind hon. Members that there is a precedent for issuing a campaign medal so long after the second world war. In 2005, it was decided to recognise the service of the Arctic convoys. An award was given to eligible veterans that included an emblem that could be worn alongside other medals. We should take advantage of that precedent and show some pride in Bomber Command's achievement. These people are our heroes. Each time they got into a plane, those young men took their lives into their hands—and they were young men. My constituent, Stan Franks, was just 19 years old. He flew 31 missions and was the youngest flight engineer to complete a tour. As he says,

> "I lost many friends. I didn't want to kill. I just wanted to fly and defend my country—all I want is recognition for what we did".

We should also remember that getting in those planes was not like getting into today's high-tech fighter jets. While flying at altitude, frostbite and asphyxiation were very real risks. Arguably, Bomber Command won the war. It took the battle to the enemy and we should honour its bravery. There is real support for doing so outside this place and within it. More than 100 Members signed an early-day motion on this subject last autumn. Let us end the hurt we have perpetrated on these honourable men. They served their country with pride and courage at great personal risk to themselves. It is time that we finally awarded them a campaign medal.

1.35 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on securing today's debate. The issue has been raised on a number of occasions in both Houses with the support of many hon. Members, yet

[Jack Lopresti]

Bomber Command veterans and their families are still fighting for the recognition that they most certainly deserve, which they earned in the most desperate and ferocious of situations.

My right hon. Friend the Minister responsible for veterans has confirmed on a previous occasion that the campaign for medal recognition of Bomber Command personnel is currently being considered as part of the Government's wider review into medals, which is expected to report shortly. Like many others, I am looking forward to the review's findings, but I warn the Minister of the deepest disappointment—indeed, resentment—that will be felt by veterans, their families and many others if Bomber Command is overlooked for the seventh decade running.

Let us always keep in the forefront of our minds that these young people—some just boys—made extraordinary sacrifices doing their duty. Their acts of bravery and dedication certainly shortened the war and we should be eternally grateful to them. I would like to declare a personal interest in these matters and explain why I feel as strongly as I do. My grandfather on my mother's side served in Bomber Command. He was born in southern Ireland, so he did not have to serve because Ireland was a neutral country. However, he emigrated at the age of 17 from Tramore in Waterford and enlisted as an air gunner. A few months later, he was a rear gunner over Germany on operations night after night.

After operations over Germany and then the Mediterranean, my grandfather fought against the Japanese, where he was shot down over Malaysia and found several weeks later in the jungle suffering from malaria. Let me help to put that into perspective. My 19-year-old son Dominic is older than my grandfather was when he started his service. As much as I trust Dominic—I hope that he forgives me for saying this—I would not be happy leaving him the keys to my car let alone imagining him flying a bomber above Germany at such a young age.

As my hon. Friend said, aircrew had no say over strategy, target choice or their mission. They just did their duty. A large number of aircrew came from further afield than even my grandfather did and they too should be recognised for their bravery and loyalty. In fact, one in four Bomber Command aircrew were from overseas. They came from Australia, New Zealand, Poland, free France, the United States, Norway, Jamaica, Rhodesia and India. Of the 55,573 Bomber Command pilots and crew who were killed, including 91 members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, 15,661 were from overseas. Some 9,887 of that number were from Canada, which represents nearly 60% of the Canadians who flew with Bomber Command. Those young people from the dominions showed true loyalty to our nation in its time of greatest need. They were volunteers who answered the call out of kinship, a strong sense of duty and shared values. If successive Governments continue to fail in recognising the huge contribution that Bomber Command made in defending our nation, they dishonour not only our own veterans, but those who came from overseas.

The aircrew of Bomber Command faced incredible challenges on a daily basis. Whatever the statistics, the cold reality was that in 1942 less than half of all heavy bomber crews would survive their first tour and only one in five would make it through a second. In 1943, only one in six bomber crews would be expected to survive their first tour, and only one in 40 their second. In the face of their achievements and bravery, how can we let restrictions and protocol, or breaking precedent, deprive Bomber Command personnel of a campaign medal for their service to our nation?

In 2008, 209 hon. Members signed an early-day motion calling for a campaign medal for Bomber Command personnel; surely a demonstration, if one was needed, of the depth of this wrongdoing. The policy of not instituting medals more than five years after the campaign can be overturned. Exceptions to King George VI's intention not to award any further world war two medals post-1948 can be made again. Yes, the pilots and aircrew were eligible for other medals, such as the France and Germany star, but what about the ground crew? They kept the aircraft flying and made the missions possible. In total, 1,479 ground crew were killed in the line of duty. Should their sacrifices not be recognised?

There are other reasons given, including the reluctance to give awards to specific military units and to those who served the war inside the UK. Neither of those reasons is insurmountable, but again they demonstrate the lack of political will. Successive Governments have failed to address the issue, but where there is the will there is always a way. I urge the Minister to let this Government be the one to right this grave injustice. During the war, the men and women of Bomber Command were unanimously regarded as heroes. As Churchill himself declared in 1940:

> "The fighters are our salvation but the bombers alone provide the means of victory".

Churchill's bombers did not fly or crew themselves. Let us now acknowledge the contribution of those that did, and made that victory possible.

1.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Andrew Robathan): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on securing this debate on the very brave men and women of Bomber Command, and their appalling sacrifice, which she has described, during the second world war. I will cover this in more detail, but there are two issues here. One is the respect and admiration that we should have for those very brave people who gave up their lives in many instances in service to their country in incredibly difficult situations. The second issue is how we should recognise their bravery and continue the world's knowledge of what they did, 66 years after the end of the second world war.

If I may recap, more than 8,000 aircraft were lost. Out of 125,000 air crew, 55,573 were killed. Statistically, a Bomber Command crew member had a worse chance of survival than an infantry officer in world war one. Some 19 members of Bomber Command received Victoria crosses. I can assure everybody here that the Government maintain a deep appreciation—a real appreciation and admiration—of the courage and sacrifice of all those who served in Bomber Command during world war two. We owe them a great deal. My own view is that every schoolchild should know what they did, and I fear that they do not. Everybody in this country should understand that one in six UK fatalities in the second world war were in Bomber Command—a staggering number.

Aerial bombardment was not new in 1939. Indeed, the first recorded example of aerial bombardment took place in the summer of 1911 when Italian aircraft, sent to north Africa to fight the Turks, dropped modified grenades on to an enemy camp near Tripoli. Damage was slight and world reaction insignificant, but it was a significant development in air power. World war one firmly established this new role. Between 1914 and 1918, two distinct types of aerial bombardment emerged. The first, practised eventually by all combatants, involved the fairly simple concept of dropping high explosives on to enemy rear areas, hitting lines of supply, command networks, fuel dumps and military concentrations. This became known as tactical bombing or, if it entailed isolating enemy forces from their own support echelons, interdiction bombing. Exactly where close support and ground attack ended and tactical bombing began was, and often still is, a debatable point.

The second form of aerial bombardment was the concept of strategic bombing. The founder of the RAF, Lord Trenchard, had postulated that the bomber was a potential war-winning weapon, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock suggested. If raids could be sustained, industrial plant would be destroyed and civilian morale undermined to the extent that the enemy would be unable to continue the war. So persuasive were those arguments by 1939 that it was a widely held fear, particularly in Britain, that city areas were doomed to destruction within days of the outbreak of war.

The RAF went to war organised into four separate command units: Fighter Command, Bomber Command, Coastal Command and Training Command. My hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock and for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) will need no reminding of the feats of Fighter Command during the desperate days of the battle of Britain, but it was then, at least, primarily a defensive force. Bomber Command's great asset was that it could take the fight to the enemy—an all too precious occurrence in those early war years. However, by the time he took over as head of Bomber Command in February 1942, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris had become disillusioned with the effects of precision bombing and was turning to area bombing. This technique required the assembly of very large bomber fleets, up to 1,000 or more, and the inundation of whole areas with high explosives and incendiaries. The aim was to use statistical probability rather than selectivity to destroy military targets, and to make a direct assault on German civilian morale. At the time, it was considered a proportionate response to the terrible damage inflicted on London, Coventry and many other British cities during the Blitz and the later V-bomb attacks.

I do not think that there should have been any guilt felt then, or now, because this was a war to the bitter end. I certainly do not believe that anybody who was involved in Bomber Command should believe that they were doing anything other than furthering the British war effort between 1939 and 1945. Debates may still rage about the strategy, but there is no doubt about the bravery and integrity of those who took part. Night after night, these brave volunteers risked giving their lives—indeed, many gave their lives. The danger was enormous: enemy night fighters, anti-aircraft fire, mechanical failures, extreme navigational challenges, and the prospect of imprisonment for those who managed to bale out in time. Sorties could take eight to nine hours and brought with them a mental as well as a physical ordeal, the intensity of which would be unfamiliar to their colleagues in uniform on the ground or at sea.

I recommend that hon. Members visit the RAF museum in Hendon, look at a Lancaster and see how the whole crew had to get out of a hatch in the front, no bigger than one of the chairs in this room, while wearing a parachute. That is, of course, one reason why so many did not get out, which is a terrifying prospect. Bomber Command pilot Mike Lewis described the experience thus:

> "We went in under an absolutely cloudless sky. We were literally over the harbour when the next thing people started reporting was that fighters were climbing up. The German pilots...turned in and just sat blasting away at us and blowing us out of the sky until eventually they ran out of gas and had to go home themselves. If there had been more gasoline I think none of us would have reached our home. We were sitting ducks. It was terrifying."

Let us not forget the absolutely crucial role of the ground crew and the in-flight engineers—more than 100,000 of them. Without them, Bomber Command would not have been able to carry out 364,514 sorties, drop more than a million bombs, and tie up vast amounts of scarce German resources that would otherwise have been used elsewhere in their war effort.

The dedication and sacrifice of those who were part of Bomber Command is not in question; the debate has always been about how best to recognise it. Those who served in Bomber Command during the second world war were eligible for one of the stars instituted for campaign service: for example, the 1939-45 star. In addition, a series of campaign stars were created for participants in particularly hazardous campaigns—this was certainly one—and many Bomber Command personnel qualified for the much-prized Air Crew Europe star or the France and Germany star.

The case for awarding a medal to those who served in Bomber Command was also considered by the relevant Committee at the time, 66 years ago. However, it was decided that this would not be appropriate specifically for service in a particular command. There is no other example that I can think of, of a particular command getting a medal. That decision was made with the benefit of evidence from all interested parties at the time—something the present Committee does not have the benefit of now.

It should be clear that these brave men and women were not overlooked. They were considered at the time. In 1985, Lady Harris awarded an unofficial medal and began a campaign historically supported by the *Daily Express*. Both my hon. Friends have said that there is a huge body of opinion supporting this; actually, although there is a great deal of sympathy and a huge amount of respect for those who served in Bomber Command, I have not seen the evidence of a huge weight of opinion that says that we should institute a medal now.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): I wrote to the Minister on 13 August last year on this very point, and included a copy of a letter from Mr Henry Pam, who served in Bomber Command. He made the point:

[Tessa Munt]

> "The Air Crew medal was not presented to those of us operating after the invasion of France etc. in 1944. Why?"

Many of those gentleman—and ladies perhaps, but mostly gentlemen—who served in Bomber Command are no longer alive. It seems mean-spirited not to consider what is happening to those who remain and to the families. We should grant some recognition by way of a medal.

Mr Robathan: I am just coming to recognition, but I point out to the hon. Lady that, if we were to institute a medal, that medal should go to every person who was killed in the second world war, or their descendants, and indeed to all those who served in the second world war. It would not only be the survivors; everyone would deserve a medal. If people were killed in the first or second world war, their campaign medals were still awarded. That is how such things are done. People who served and were killed certainly deserved their campaign medals, which were given to their descendants. That is right and proper and still happens today.

Tessa Munt: Were those particular gentlemen not extraordinary in their courage and bravery? As the Minister wrote in his letter to me, Mr Pam had received the 1939 to 1945 star, the France and Germany star, the defence medal and the war medal for 1939 to 1945. The peculiar situation in which Bomber Command found itself should surely be a prerequisite for handing out some sort of medal in recognition.

Mr Robathan: The hon. Lady is of course entitled to her opinion. Those people were incredibly brave and I in no way wish to detract from my admiration for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke referred to his son, and yet the even younger men of Bomber Command did things one can hardly believe—but then, so did those who served in Fighter Command, and they did not get a medal, and nor did those brave men and women in the Special Operations Executive who parachuted into occupied France, the majority of whom were executed when they got there. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock is saying that the people of Bomber Command were brave, and I believe that we recognise their bravery—we should do so, and we pay tribute to it—and that is what I am coming on to.

Since I became a Minister, I have been involved with the Bomber Command memorial. The Bomber Command Association is establishing a national memorial and has even cut the turf—I went to the turf-cutting ceremony in the summer. In October 2008, the Prime Minister, while in opposition, said:

> "I have always believed that the 55,000 brave men of Bomber Command who lost their lives in the service of their country deserve the fullest recognition of their courage and sacrifice."

I believe the same.

The Ministry of Defence is pleased to chair the Bomber Command memorial funding campaign, which is moving ahead with pace, and that was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock. A construction contract has been awarded and the Bomber Command memorial will be located in Green park, opposite the RAF club on Piccadilly. We are aiming at a completion date in 2012. I am actively supporting the memorial and was meant to be having a meeting in a little over an hour with Malcolm White of the Bomber Command Association. Unfortunately, we had to cancel that meeting, but I shall be meeting him shortly to discuss how to facilitate the memorial, as well as various issues that have been in the newspapers. That will be the best and most fitting memorial, which will last long after we have all gone, reminding people of the sacrifice of our forefathers.

On the medal review, in the coalition's programme for government it set out its intention to review the rules governing the award of medals, as a part of the commitment to rebuild the military covenant. A draft review was produced to enable us to consider the various views, and we sent the draft report to the campaign groups, including the Bomber Command Association, along with an invitation to submit comments. That review has now been carried out and the closing date for responses from the campaign groups has now passed. The formal responses we received have been carefully considered, but it is worth noting that the Bomber Command Association offered no comments on the medals review. The review will be published in the not-too-distant future.

There is no doubting the bravery and sacrifice of all those involved in the thousands of sorties made by Bomber Command over occupied Europe during the second world war. They made a real difference to the outcome of the war. It is equally clear that that difference was a crucial one, recognised by the other side. Hitler's armaments Minister, Albert Speer, who more than anyone else in Europe knew about the true effect of the bombing campaign and the ability of the Germans to maintain the war, summed it up thus:

> "It made every square metre of Germany a front. For us, it was the greatest lost battle of the war."

In a sense, there could be no more convincing testimonial.

We support the erection of a fitting memorial to those whose courage made such a critical contribution to the successful prosecution of the air campaign in the second world war. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock is right when she says that it is not too late to honour the brave men and women who took part in Bomber Command. We are honouring them next year with the erection of the memorial, which I applaud.

Question put and agreed to.

1.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 October 2011

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

Arch Cru Compensation Scheme

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr Dunne.)*

9.30 am

Tom Greatrex (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Owen, in what is an important debate. Since it was announced last week, a number of hon. Members have spoken to me about the issue, and I am far from alone in having received e-mails, correspondence and surgery visits from people who have been affected by the collapse of the Arch Cru investment fund. I am pleased that the Minister is present to respond to the debate. I know from previous debates that he has a reputation for seeking to answer questions as fully as possible, and I hope that he will continue to do so today. In recognition of his reputation in that regard, and given the high number of Members present who wish to speak or intervene, I will keep my remarks as brief as I can to give the Minister the maximum time possible to respond. I also wish to recognise the efforts made by the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) who is present for the debate. He has been trying valiantly for some time to secure a parliamentary debate on Arch Cru, but it was my fortune that my name happened to be picked. I know that he will contribute to the debate in due course.

Many hon. Members are familiar with aspects of the background that led to the collapse of Arch Cru, but some salient points bear repetition. Arch Cru was established in 2006 to provide low-risk, cautiously managed funds that were sold through independent financial advisers and, like all investment funds in the UK, were regulated by the Financial Services Authority. The authorised corporate director was Capita Financial Managers Ltd, part of the listed Capita group. The two depositories of the funds were Bank of New York Mellon and HSBC. Having spoken to a number of investors and financial advisers over recent weeks, I am in no doubt that the association of those names with the fund lent credibility and provided a degree of comfort for many investors. Approximately 20,000 people invested in Arch Cru, many of whom were small investors who invested retirement savings or lump sum pension payments into the fund, following advice from financial advisers. Those to whom I have spoken invested on the basis that since it involved their retirement pots, funds needed to be cautiously invested. That was the attraction and the reason for their investment.

The fund was suspended in March 2009 by the FSA following a warning that it was insolvent. At that time it was worth a total of £363.6 million but since then—unsurprisingly—the value has fallen and at the most recent evaluation in March 2011, the fund was valued at £148.8 million. Estimates vary but between 4,000 and 10,000 people suffered losses following the collapse of that fund. Many of those people never expected to be in such a position because they were attracted to the low-risk, cautiously managed fund in which they invested. This is not a tale of a get-rich-quick scheme gone wrong, or of a high-risk, high-return investment vehicle. It is a story of thousands of people who were advised to invest savings for their retirement precisely because the fund was categorised as cautiously managed. As we now know, the reality was somewhat different. Far from being cautiously managed, funds were invested via Guernsey cells in what some would argue was a high-risk and cavalier manner. Investments included property in Dubai, Greek shipping and ferries.

My constituents—and, I am sure, those of other Members—have questions that fall within four key areas. First is the role of Capita Financial Managers which, as I have stated, was the authorised corporate director with responsibility for providing assurance that the fund was operating correctly. It sold its services as a hosting solution. I have some of its marketing material with me that states:

> "For investment managers looking to manage current assets with authorised fund structures there exists an alternative to establishing your own unit, trust manager or authorised corporate director…Capita offers a 'hosting' solution which enables investment managers to focus on investment activities. In this arrangement Capita Financial group becomes the authorised entity by the Financial Services Authority and thereby undertakes the management company function on your behalf, delivering comprehensive administrative and investment servicing and support to your funds."

That is how Capita sold its services. It is an outsourcing group.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. The research papers we have received state that investors were

> "sucked into the funds by some of the slickest marketing ever put together in financial services. Marketing so good, in fact, that it bamboozled many good independent financial advisers".

People will lose 30% or 40% of their money. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is unacceptable and that it was a sham from start to finish?

Tom Greatrex: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman and I will go on to develop the point about marketing to independent financial advisers.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): A number of my constituents have written to me voicing their concern about this issue. Does my hon. Friend think that there should be an urgent inquiry into the matter? On the basis of what he has just said, the situation is more serious than a lot of people realised.

Tom Greatrex: I agree with my hon. Friend and I will make some of those points later in my remarks. We are only at the beginning of uncovering what went on, and the situation is worrying for many other funds. There are also questions for regulators that I will go on to address.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way he presents the subject under discussion and on securing the debate. The fact that MPs from all four nations of the UK and five political parties are present indicates how widespread the problem is throughout the country.

[Mark Lazarowicz]

We clearly need an inquiry and to find out what has been going on. We do not want a repeat of the Equitable Life saga when it took 10 or 15 years before people got sight of any money. We need an inquiry, but we also need action by regulators and the Government to try and help people who, as my hon. Friend pointed out, in many cases made what they believed to be a low-risk investment for their later years. They will not be able to wait 10 or 15 years.

Tom Greatrex: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that people get their money and that they get it in the right way. I will make that point later in my contribution. Capita is an outsourcing group. The structure works so that Capita assumes a legal responsibility for the assets and subcontracts management back to the fund house. It is effectively an outsourcing operation.

While preparing for this debate I had the opportunity to speak to some individuals who used to work for Capita. What they told me shocked and appalled me. I was told that there was relatively little oversight over funds in Capita Financial Managers, and that there was a small team of people, a high staff turnover, and lots of relatively young and inexperienced staff who worked for over 300 funds at the same time. One individual who previously worked for Capita told me that Capita was

> "not the best managed firm and the compliance culture left a lot to be desired. Capita is not particularly well respected in the industry and it is no surprise to me that they found themselves in trouble."

Those remarks contrast greatly with the way that many people viewed Capita on the basis of their investments. Capita is a household name that for many people has a degree of respectability. People made their investment decisions partly because Capita's name was attached to that investment.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Capita is also international. How much power might we have over Capita if it spreads to New York and other places?

Tom Greatrex: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that Capita group is involved in a range of businesses across the world. Capita Financial Managers, however, was regulated by the FSA and was supposedly in a position to provide assurance in this case. That is where questions need to be asked.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman makes the important point that whatever management inadequacies there may have been in Capita, it was regulated by the FSA. It oversaw what was supposed to be a prudently managed fund. Money was being put into totally illiquid assets and very dodgy assets, yet that was never identified. Was there not a regulatory failure in that regard?

Tom Greatrex: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I want to come on to the role of the FSA as the regulator and I particularly want the Minister to respond on the potential role of the Financial Conduct Authority in the future as the FSA is wound up.

Mr Iain McKenzie (Inverclyde) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that Capita needs to step up to its responsibilities? What it is offering in compensation is derogatory to the people who have lost their life savings. It needs to step up to its responsibilities and offer 100% compensation.

Tom Greatrex: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I want to come on to the inadequacy of the payment deal—it is not a compensation deal—on the table at present, because there are serious questions to ask about that as well.

If what I have set out was Capita's reputation among some in the industry, it is perhaps not surprising that Capita appears not to have known about the activity of the sub-funds investing in the very high-risk activity via the Guernsey cells; that Capita appears not to have been aware of the illiquidity in the fund by 2008; and that Capita appears not to have provided a proper sign-off for the accounts. I say "appear" because we do not know for certain the detail of the failings, because the FSA, in correspondence that it has copied to Members of Parliament, says that it is unable to provide details of its investigations.

Suffice it to say that those independent financial advisers who trusted the Capita brand worked on the basis of the CF Arch Cru marketing material, which Capita would have had responsibility for signing off and copies of which I have with me. It includes material headed "Going Well" from November 2008, by which time the FSA had, we know, started looking into Arch Cru. There is also a weekly update from 9 March 2009—four days before suspension of the fund. In approving tones, it boasts of cumulative decline year to year of 2.6% compared with double digit falls in most major traditional public asset houses. It says that all its UK funds retain a top five rank in their category. Those statements were issued to financial advisers just four days before the fund was suspended.

In addition to that type of material, the chief executive of Capita Finance Managers, Chris Addenbrooke, in *Investment Adviser* in September 2008, said:

> "We've got the credibility to take on the ACD"—

authorised corporate director—

> "role. Our clients see that as attractive."

Given that material and comments such as that, there is no doubt that people thought that they were investing in something that was very different from what it turned out to be. It is apparent that at the very least there were serious shortcomings in the role of Capita as the ACD.

Secondly, there is the role of the FSA. Earlier this week, I spent some time with representatives of the FSA, discussing Arch Cru, and I am grateful for their time and their engagement in seeking to answer some of my questions, but serious questions remain for the FSA to answer. It was statutorily responsible for regulating Capita Financial Managers. Why did it not know or not appear to know what was happening with Arch Cru? I also spoke to people who had previously worked for the FSA. They said that the ARROW—advanced, risk-responsive operating framework—visit was not until late 2008 and that was not atypical given the risk matrix, which would have meant that the likely ARROW visits would have taken place only every 18 months approximately. I understand and accept that this matter can be complex.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman making the point that this is not simply a matter of what the FSA did and whether it did it appropriately, inappropriately, negligently or otherwise, and that there was something fundamentally wrong with the processes of the regulatory regime that was operating at the time?

Tom Greatrex: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. There are two points: a point about what the FSA did in relation to Arch Cru, and a further point about the regulatory regime. As I said, with the FCA about to be set up, there is an important issue for the Government to deal with in that regard as well.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate and on the forensic and effective way in which he is presenting a very important case, which affects my constituents as it does others. Does it not pass all understanding how the FSA could have said on 21 June in its statement that it "considers that this package"—the £54 million package—

> "is a fair and reasonable outcome, which is in the best interests of investors"

when it is not fair, not reasonable and clearly not in the best interests of investors?

Tom Greatrex: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend. I hope to make a couple of remarks about that package in a few moments.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): May I return to the point that was made a moment ago? Does it not appear that the structure set up for Arch Cru was designed to ensure that the FSA did not notice what was going on, although the setting up of the structure should have been noticed by the FSA and picked up at an earlier stage?

Tom Greatrex: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. When I spent some time with representatives of the FSA, they showed me a diagram of the structure of the fund and it was amazing to see quite how labyrinthine it was and is. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that that is the root of part of the problems. At the same time, seeking to say, "Well, that's the responsibility of the Guernsey regulator. That's the responsibility of someone else," does not deal with the central issue. That is the lesson for the future that we need to be conscious of.

Fiona O'Donnell (East Lothian) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way. Although it is welcome to see cross-party support today for the investors who are innocent victims of absolutely disgraceful behaviour by Capita, will my hon. Friend seek an assurance from the Government that their red tape challenge will not get in the way of effective regulation of this sector to prevent other people from losing out in the way in which the Arch Cru investors have?

Tom Greatrex: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I am sure that the Minister heard her entreaty. I agree with her that in seeking to ensure that the regulation is right, there is a great danger in looking to light-touch regulation. The consequence of that could well be the position that we find ourselves debating this morning. I am sure that the Minister will take that warning on board.

The third issue is the payment scheme negotiated by the FSA from Capita, HSBC and BNY Mellon. As everyone knows, they are careful to say that that deal is not an admission of liability. The FSA says and has said to investors that it is a "reasonable outcome" for them. It says that it saves time, given that a breach does not have to be proved in what the background note describes as a very complex case, involving multiple parties with different responsibilities. It says that it considered that it was appropriate to align the Financial Ombudsman Service decision making with the payment scheme rules.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. It is nothing less than a scandal that hard-working people are being treated in this way. They are suffering anxiety and concern when all they wanted to do was to secure their future. Two of my constituents have written to me to say this:

> "Would it be possible for you to support a request for a Section 14 enquiry under the Financial Services Act? This will provide the best opportunity for all investors to receive an improved compensation package."

I would welcome my hon. Friend's view on that. Clearly, I would support such an inquiry if it could deliver an improved compensation package, because the concern and anxiety that people are suffering is terrible. Listening to what they have to say is heart-rending.

Tom Greatrex: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree with him and will go on to ask the Minister—I am sure that he is expecting this—for a section 14 inquiry and for him to explain why one has not been instituted so far.

To me and to many of the investors, the deal brokered by the FSA—the payment scheme—sounds like an admission of defeat. They cannot work out what went wrong and why.

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for the sterling work that he has done, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns), to bring this matter to the fore. I am delighted that it is my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury who is here to answer questions. What the 15 people in South Derbyshire who have written to me about the matter have experienced is heartbreaking. They thought that they were doing the right thing, but they have been presented with this letter by the FSA saying, "Take it or leave it—70%. You're lucky to be getting something quickly." Is that really how we should play the financial game? Perhaps there should be a bigger inquiry into the way the FSA has been carrying out its duties?

Tom Greatrex: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That all points to the case for a section 14 investigation to get to the bottom of these events and to prevent them from ever happening again.

To return to the payment scheme, it sounds like the FSA cannot work out what went wrong and why, and where the liability was.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): My constituent Linda Marsh is particularly exercised by the fact that she is being pressured to accept the payment offer on the table because of the looming

[Angela Smith]

November deadline. Is it not really urgent that we remove that deadline and allow a proper inquiry to take place?

Tom Greatrex: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She makes an important point about people being able to make the right decision when they are offered this payment deal, particularly given that it seems to bind in the Financial Ombudsman Service in a way that makes it impossible for it to take a case subsequently. My hon. Friend makes an important point.

Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): On that point, one of the concerns raised by constituents who have come to me is that the compensation offer is conditional and precludes legal action against Capita being brought to court by any investor who accepts it. However, it leaves open the option of the investor pursuing the financial advisers, who were, as Members have rightly said, misled by the information provided to them. That seems a very unjust transfer of responsibility.

Tom Greatrex: The hon. Lady is exactly right. It is almost as though the deal that has been reached leaves the liability with people who have, as she said, been misled, with the result that they end up carrying the can, which would be very unfair. That is why the deal on the table is wholly inadequate, and I will go on to make a few points about that.

Ann McKechin (Glasgow North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is inappropriate, given that such serious regulatory failures have been identified in this crisis, for the FSA to be so directly involved in the negotiations and the settlement being offered? The FSA lacks the appropriate independence, because it might be to its advantage for the settlement not to result in legal action and further inquiry.

Tom Greatrex: I thank my hon. Friend, who makes an important point, which goes to the heart of this issue—the role of the FSA as the regulator and, it seems, the broker of a deal that might help to get something off its back.

It seems the FSA cannot work out what happened. It wants a line to be drawn under this issue, but thousands of unhappy people expected the regulator to prevent this abuse from happening. The FSA has said that the deal will return to investors approximately or up to 70% of their investment, and the words "up to" are quite significant. That 70% is based on the £54 million that has been returned already, £149 million from the sale of other assets, which were valued at that level at 31 March 2011, and an additional £54 million, which Capita, HSBC and BNY Mellon agreed to without accepting liability in a deal brokered by the FSA. However, that £149 million might well not be realised, especially when we consider that the asset base included Greek shipping and what have been described to me as rust-bucket ferries, as well as middle eastern property, the value of which—if there is any left at all—could have fallen, even in the short time since March, given the current economic conditions.

The question I put to the FSA—it was entirely reasonable, but the FSA was unable to answer it—was why it did not add up the asset sales and projected asset sales and subtract them from the investors' losses to give a figure that would make the compensation up to 100% of what people invested. In that way, people could get their money back; they would not make a profit, but simply get back what they invested, based on the assurances they were given by an organisation that was regulated by the FSA when they took out their investment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One thing that has come to my attention through my constituents is that the FSA has given advice to investors pushing them towards independent legal advice. Some of that legal advice has led to further complications and added to the money they had already lost. Does the hon. Gentleman feel the direction the FSA pushed investors in should be addressed, given the extra heartache and money losses they have experienced as a result of seeking legal advice that has turned out to be wrong?

Tom Greatrex: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I do not wish to get drawn into the background dispute between people who have paid into a class action legal fund and people involved in a different action group on behalf of investors. To be frank, I have spoken for far longer than I intended, and I want to give others the chance to get in. There are lots of complicated issues, and I want to focus on the compensation scheme before I draw my remarks to a conclusion. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

The approach I have suggested would simply enable people to get their money back—to get up to 100%. This case has been described as one of the worst investment scandals of recent years. There was a similar scandal under the FSA's predecessor, the Investment Management Regulatory Organisation, and the name Peter Young will mean something to many people here. The relationships and problems involved were broadly similar, but following the suspension of the fund in question in 1996, IMRO achieved a settlement whereby people got their money back. The deal was funded by Morgan Grenfell, which was broadly in the same position as Capita.

That settlement was agreed three months after suspension. Although IMRO took action against the chief executive of the fund manager, the offer was not paid until January 1999—two years and four months after suspension. In the case of Arch Cru, however, it is now two years and eight months since suspension, and only now are letters starting to go out to people with the payment offer—I understand that they are going out now or will be going out in the next couple of weeks. Why was the FSA unable to get close to the resolution achieved by its predecessor as regulator in a similar time frame? Why is up to 70% acceptable to the FSA, when IMRO managed to get 100%?

Fourthly, there is the issue of ensuring that these events do not happen again. Something needs to change if these things are not to happen again, and people who invest their retirement nest eggs or lump sums on the basis of being told that a fund invests cautiously are not to lose their money, not to have to battle through the press to get a hearing, not to have to get a debate in Parliament so that issues can be aired and not to experience the stress, anxiety and rank unfairness of losing their money in a high-risk gamble they were told was a cautious investment.

In this regard, the FSA is about to be replaced by the Financial Conduct Authority, and the relevant proposals are beginning their pre-legislative scrutiny. What will be put in place to enable the FCA to prevent something similar from happening again? All of us, including the Government, have an opportunity to get the proposals right, and that is why these issues are a matter for the Minister and the Government. The Minister and the Treasury correspondence unit have been clear that this affair is a matter for the regulator, not them, but when the ACD fails, the regulator admits it did not know what was happening because of the structure of an investment vehicle, and the basis of a payment offer is so woefully inadequate, these things become a matter for the Minister; it becomes the Government's responsibility to prevent or minimise the risk of such things ever happening again.

It also becomes a matter of my constituents and those of other Members present being entitled to information, but the FSA and others are not releasing much information. That is why I am putting the questions to the Minister today. Does he believe that Capita fulfilled its role effectively? Does he accept that the FSA has been hampered in fulfilling its role as regulator by its structure? Does he understand that in not providing information, there is suspicion among the investors? Does he realise that on that basis, up to 70% is just not good enough? Does he now know that the FCA needs to be bolstered for the future? Given all the above, will he now ensure that there is a section 14 investigation into what went on with Arch Cru?

I have spoken for far longer than I had intended, so I will conclude. It is easy, when looking into the matter, as I have done over the past few weeks, to get into the details and get lost in the technicalities and minutiae of the regulatory regime, and in the reputations of blue-chip companies, the statements of their chief executives and other individuals, and even the reputations of some of those in high-profile positions in the investment fund. Ultimately, the matter is about people—people such as my constituent Mr Pringle of Cambuslang, whom I have been in correspondence with. He e-mailed me yesterday and asked me to include a final point in the debate, which I will conclude on. He said that

> "my wife…and I invested all our pension money with the Cru in this 'Low Risk' venture. Being pension money we obviously did not want any high risk ventures that would put our money at risk…We are extremely disappointed in the FSA's attitude towards this case, by saying that they think Capita's offer is 'Fair and Reasonable'. Not in any way is their offer 'Fair and Reasonable'. Investing in Greek Shipping is not 'Low Risk'!"

That is the crux of the issue. That is why it is a matter for the Government as well as the regulator, and that is why the Minister needs to respond to the debate this morning.

10.1 am

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I want to congratulate and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex) on securing the debate and on the way in which he introduced it. He set an absolutely right tone to try to uncover the scandal and seek justice for many innocent investors.

This debate is the first opportunity to air serious issues that have cost some 20,000 people significant sums in respect of a fund once valued at £400 million. The title of the debate relates to the compensation scheme, which is the obvious priority of investors. However, there is also a need to interrogate the background, which raises questions about the scale, source, timing and conditions of the scheme.

The investors' starting point in the financial scandal was to receive and consider advice from their independent financial adviser. As the hon. Gentleman suggested, the funds were clearly advertised and marketed as cautious managed. That would have sounded reasonable and fitted the risk profile of many private investors across the country.

Jonathan Evans (Cardiff North) (Con): May I be the first on this side of the Chamber to pay credit to my hon. Friend for his tenacity in assisting people in bringing this matter before the House?

The point that my hon. Friend is making specifically relates to the decision made by investors. I have constituents who have invested, including one who wrote to me only yesterday to tell me that he invested £120,000—the totality of his pensions and savings—primarily because he wanted to be in cautious-managed funds that were safe. That highlights the regulatory failure to which my hon. Friend is alluding.

Alun Cairns: The cautious-managed issue is a common theme throughout regarding the Arch Cru funds. Cautious managed, from my time in financial services, would be argued as an investment category that fits the majority of people across the United Kingdom. However, investigation shows that the Financial Services Authority does not regulate the risk classification of funds, which is assessed by the Investment Management Association. I find that staggering, considering that that is a fundamental element in the decision-making process of any investor. The IMA is merely an industry managers' representative body. The FSA has told me that classification is not a regulated activity, so it does not have the powers to amend the classification of funds. However, the FSA needs to be reminded of its statutory objectives, specifically the one relating to maintaining market confidence.

The reality of the investment was that it was not cautious managed. The open-ended investment company invested in unconventional investments, as we have heard. Cell companies were formed and floated on the Guernsey stock exchange, investing in private equity and shipping loans, among other high-risk transactions. As that was a recognised exchange, it circumvented the FSA radar, although FSA rules banned such illiquid investments in open-ended funds. Therefore, it was no surprise that in March 2009, almost three years after they were launched, the funds were suspended.

However, the situation is not that simple. The FSA identified issues with the funds in October and November 2008, but the funds were permitted to continue to trade. It conducted an advanced risk responsive operating framework test at the time, which should have highlighted the issues, particularly pricing concerns. Yet, the funds were only suspended four months later.

Capita became the authorised corporate director, and had failed to act. It had responsibility for corporate governance and daily pricing, and control over the

[Alun Cairns]

underlying assets. It initially denied having control of the underlying assets, but the auditors' report from Ernst and Young showed that it held more than 75% of the shares. I suggest that Capita mispriced the funds before suspension due to its failure to exercise control to value the underlying assets accurately. There was a breach of the investment mandate and a pursuit of a reckless investment strategy by Capita's designated fund manager.

Clearly, that negligence led to Capita's £54 million compensation offer—70% of the value of the funds at the time of suspension, together with the remaining assets from the valuation on 31 March. That has been criticised as unlikely to hold up. Investors are being asked to accept an offer without knowing what they will receive, as that depends on the value secured on the sale of the remaining assets, which will take years. That is an obvious disparity and injustice.

The auditor was Moore Stephens. It surely should have identified the issues, but it has still yet to offer any form of explanation, let alone compensation. The Guernsey regulators also have some explaining to do and have to accept their part of the responsibility and liability.

Sir Alan Beith: Does my hon. Friend know whether the FSA consulted the Guernsey authorities or sought their assistance at any stage?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend raises a good point. I have raised that issue with the FSA, which said that it was beyond its jurisdiction. However, to my mind, protecting UK investors is certainly its priority and should fall within its jurisdiction.

To date, there has been no explanation of the logic behind the £54 million offered, and the conditions are somewhat restrictive. Having recently met with the FSA, I know that the reasons behind the current delay concern third-party rights, which I understand. However, it has taken more than two and a half years from suspension to get to the current stage.

I have a constituent who invested several hundred thousand pounds of his retirement money into the funds, but there will be constituents of other hon. Members present who had invested far smaller sums, and which may be even more significant to them individually. A figure of 70% of the valuation at suspension is completely inappropriate, given that all that our constituents had done was to invest in a regulated, cautious-managed fund with a regulated, authorised corporate director and approved auditors. The delay conflicts with the timing of a possible legal challenge. Investors need to act soon to fall within the legal time frame set out by the courts.

In considering criticism of the FSA, it seems hardly just that, having failed in its responsibility to regulate, it has the responsibility to investigate and negotiate a compensation package for the people whom it failed in the first place.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The debate shows that we have a fund that was a scam and regulation that was a sham. We have a problem not just with the FSA's dereliction of regulatory oversight, but with its deviance and connivance in the deed with Capita. This debate is an opportunity for Parliament to blow the whistle. The FSA is now blatantly offside, and surely it is up to the Minister and the Treasury to make it clear that the deed cannot stand and the deadline must not stand.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman has made an extremely powerful point. This is the first debate on Arch Cru, and certainly on the FSA and its change to the successor bodies. Those who have responsibility for this matter need to bear in mind the strength of feeling among investors and the number of people who have turned up to this debate. This issue will not go away until investors feel that they have received justice.

The regulator, the Financial Services Authority, arguably failed in its duty as did the investigators and negotiators. Clearly, there was a position of conflict. It angers me that at every meeting and in every communication, the FSA points its finger at the independent financial advisers. In view of the FSA's four strategy objectives, passing the buck to the IFAs is wholly inadequate. The pricing and fund performance would have been integral to the advice provided by any independent financial adviser.

In a meeting last week, the FSA told me that the obligation of suitability lies with the IFA. It is unrealistic for IFAs to have the capacity to interrogate individually all marketed funds, products and pricing strategies, or to speak to the financial directors and auditors of every firm on which they advise, when the FSA, with all its resources, failed to protect investors from wrongdoing in this respect.

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): Independent financial advisers may be being criticised, but is my hon. Friend not surprised that the Serious Fraud Office has not been more involved in this patently criminal investigation?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the role he has played in uncovering many of these issues. I will come on to the Serious Fraud Office in a moment.

Sammy Wilson: I accept the hon. Gentleman's defence of the independent financial advisers. None the less, the only interface that many investors have is with an independent financial adviser. Is there not an obligation upon them at least to check out the funds on which they advise? Is there not some responsibility there?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful for that valid point. Clearly, IFAs cannot be excluded from all responsibility, but we need to bear in mind the context in which they are working. If they are looking at the strategy and pricing of a fund classified as cautious managed, we need to recognise the context in which that advice is being given. Therefore, the failure of the FSA to set the right context in which an IFA can make recommendations is fundamental to the issue.

There is another conflict. The FSA regulates the authorised corporate directors and Capita acts as the authorised corporate director for more than 300 firms. Taking action against Capita could create difficulties, leading to panic in the marketplace. The FSA has powers under section 166 of the Financial Service and Markets Act 2000 to instigate an independent investigation into organisations that take such responsibilities. Will the Minister tell us whether any such action has been taken by the FSA?

The Arch Cru affair is a minefield of accusation and counter-claim. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) referred to the Serious Fraud Office. I was alarmed to discover that two of the three main directors or partners who established the Arch Cru funds—Robin Farrell and Robert Addison—are still operating, albeit under a new name of Arch Global. Allegations have been made to the Serious Fraud Office about how Arch funds were invested in a property company with common directors. Student accommodation was bought on the open market at one price, only to be sold to the Arch investors shortly afterwards for an inflated sum. I have no knowledge of whether or not those points are true, but they clearly need to be investigated.

As for compensation issues, the auditors and the Guernsey Financial Services Commission certainly need to be pursued by some authority, be it the FSA, the Minister or other parties.

Finally, in view of the FSA's actions and the associated conflicts, I am troubled that section 404 of the 2000 Act can bind the financial services ombudsman to the FSA's judgment on the level of compensation. The FSA has made its view of the 70% figure quite obvious in its statement. Therefore, even if investors seek to make a claim involving the financial services ombudsman, or if they follow other routes, the FSA can limit the compensation to 70% at a later stage.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): Clearly, my constituents will wonder what the point of a financial services ombudsman is if they cannot seek redress through it to get a better deal than Capita is already offering.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He underlines the power of the FSA to limit compensation, rather than to uncover and to provide just compensation for people who have been ill-advised and ill-treated throughout this whole process.

These issues need to be reconsidered in an equitable way and without conflict.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the vital thing that needs to be done straight away is to lift the deadline so that people can make decisions, knowing that they are not throwing away some future interest? Will he also join me in saying to the Minister that, whatever direct powers the Government may or may not have, they do have the opportunity to call people together to say that the present situation is unfair and not right for investors? They need to find a way to make it possible for MPs, financial advisers and everyone else to say to investors, "This is what you should do now."

Alun Cairns: That pragmatic and practical intervention would certainly set us on the right road to gaining justice for investors. The issue needs to be reconsidered in an equitable way and without conflict. The Minister and the Government should have the responsibility to bring together the various parties. Under section 14 of the 2000 Act, the Minister also has the power to launch a formal investigation, so that those with conflict are removed and the situation is judged objectively and properly. That will be the first step towards achieving justice for investors.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the points he is making. On the section 14 inquiry, does he not agree that one of the most important things is for investors and their financial advisers to be able to make an informed decision? An informed decision cannot be made until that inquiry has happened and the real bases of the problems and of any compensation have been set out in detail.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. When such problems are combined with questions about the legal time frame, investors who have experienced wrongdoing are in the unenviable position of making decisions about receiving compensation or pursuing it through the courts, without there being a thorough investigation of who is responsible.

I thank hon. Members for their support, and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West for securing this debate. There will be many more such debates until justice is achieved for investors.

10.18 am

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It is great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, and to follow the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) who, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex), has pursued this matter with such dedication.

I rise to speak on behalf of my constituents who have been affected by this debacle, including Michael Sharkey, Ian Matthews and Donald Tart. They have invested not hundreds and thousands of pounds but smaller amounts, which are highly significant for their future standard of living. There is widespread concern, nay fury, among my constituents that they are seeing only up to 70% of the returns in this so-called £54 million funding package. In many circumstances, they face the loss of more than 40% of their investments. As we have heard, we are discussing people's lives and money that people had worked hard for and put away for retirement or hoped to pass on to their children or grandchildren.

Of course, we will not know the full scale of the negligence involved and the real losses until all the remaining assets of the fund are eventually sold. However, private advice has conservatively estimated the losses in my constituency alone at around £1.5 million, which is a sizeable amount of money for my constituents, or to put it another way that is around 1.5% of the value of the contract recently awarded to Capita to run the national pension scheme. As the authorised corporate director for the Arch Cru investment fund, and therefore having the regulatory responsibility that we have heard so much about today, the Government might think about stepping back from giving Capita further powers and authorities. We have heard about the extraordinary negligence and even allegations of criminal activity involved in the running of these funds.

In June, I tabled 19 parliamentary questions to find out just how much business this Government have awarded to Capita. As of 3 August 2011, the Government had awarded 447 contracts worth at least £112 million to Capita. The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) has suggested that the Government have a role to play in bringing people to the table. I suggest

[Tristram Hunt]

that if someone is awarding £112 million-worth of contracts, they have a powerful role to play in bringing people to the table.

Jonathan Evans: Has the hon. Gentleman done the research to help hon. Members understand how many contracts Capita received before 2010, under the previous Administration? My guess is that it would be a significant multiple of the figure that he has just given.

Tristram Hunt: I was going to say that I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but he seemed to be making an unnecessarily partisan point when we are trying to work together for the good of our constituents. I will simply let it pass in that manner.

That figure of £112 million does not include contracts from the Department of Energy and Climate Change, contracts from the Ministry of Defence, which would only provide ranged values of contracts up to a total of £20.6 million and contracts awarded by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, which simply did not answer my question. I hope that the Minister will seek out the truth himself.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one important aspect is what attitude the Government take? The second important point is that Capita and its shareholders ought to make a clear assessment of the reputational risk of Capita handling something where things clearly went wrong and of its failure to spot what was going wrong.

Tristram Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that what we are seeing this morning is the decimation of the reputation of Capita. That decimation will only grow unless Capita steps up to the plate, works with the Government and accepts that it is in its own long-term interest, as well as its moral obligation, to ensure that those who invested in this fund on the basis of Capita's reputation see their payments returned.

I will not go through all the intricacies of my investigation into the awarding of contracts to Capita. Suffice to say that the Government have a whip hand on this issue and should be thinking about using it.

The point is that with financial products and investment opportunities becoming ever more complex, it is vital that investors have confidence in the regulatory framework that upholds their investment. It has been said that

> "A badly designed product or a product that is widely mis-sold can have a negative effect on consumer outcomes and actually, over the long term, a negative effect on the industry. It doesn't just affect the particular product or firm involved. It also erodes people's confidence in financial services."

As the Minister will know, those are not my words but his words.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making a crucial point about confidence. Although it is important that people have confidence in the independent financial adviser that they go to, and that they have confidence in whatever companies are operating under the different structures, surely the supreme amount of confidence must be placed in the regulatory authority that has to oversee all those things. That is the crucial point that the Minister must respond to.

Tristram Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. What we have seen with the Financial Services Authority is a lack of confidence in its capacity to deal with this inquiry and the regulation of it. That is why I join my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West in urging the Minister to take advantage of section 14 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 to launch an inquiry, because the FSA has been silent on this matter for too long and as a result investors have little confidence in it. The FSA is part of the regulatory framework that initially failed our constituents.

I will wrap up now as I know that other hon. Members want to speak. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West that we are only at the beginning of this process. As I have said, we need the sort of inquiry allowed under section 14 of the 2000 Act. We also need a proper compensation deal and package, and I am struck by the 1996 Investment Management Regulatory Organisation model as a way of moving forward.

However, the Government have a role in this process. They are pouring money down the neck of Capita and for the Government to say that this issue is nothing to do with them strikes me and my constituents as remarkably detached and arrogant. Actually, the Government have a role to play in bringing people to the table, making Capita see sense and delivering justice for our constituents.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Before I call Guy Opperman, I remind Members that I will call the Front-Bench spokesmen from 10.45 am onwards. If Members wish to catch my eye and speak, will they stand up when I call Guy Opperman?

10.26 am

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Owen, for calling me to speak.

The victims in this case are savers, widows and pensioners, who we must not forget and who we are fundamentally elected to fight for. It is definitely in the Government's interests—is it not?—to encourage proper saving and proper investment. One can use this particular disaster—it is nothing less than that—to encourage proper investment in proper companies.

I am very pleased that, along with other colleagues, I have this opportunity to speak today on an issue that dozens of my constituents whose lives have been irreparably damaged by CF Arch Cru have contacted me about.

I must thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex) for securing this debate. A lot of us have tried to secure such a debate. I also want to thank him because he gave his address in a measured, reasonable, all-party tone. That is welcome, because hon. Members are united—in every part of the country and in every democratic and political process—in their view of the disaster that has occurred.

I must also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. He has sought debate after debate after debate on this issue and was, frankly, pipped at the post by the might of Scotland in the form of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, who snuck up the inside rail and secured this debate. However, I know that we are all working together, which is a wonderful thing to see.

Obviously I speak as a constituency MP, but I also speak as someone who, for approximately 15 years, was employed on a repeat basis by Her Majesty's Government as a prosecutor of fraud trials. I worked for the Attorney-General and the Serious Fraud Office, and I bear the scars of involvement with cases such as Blue Arrow and Guinness, and particularly a scam in relation to a company called Moneywise, which was investigated by the *Financial Times*. In that case, I spent six long months in Guildford Crown court bringing fraudsters to justice and recovering money. It was another case where people were defrauded by supposedly safe investments and money was taken from them. We successfully brought prosecutions for conspiracy to defraud.

I do not know the inner details of the particular case that we are discussing today, because only those involved, the Financial Services Authority and others have full access to the documentation. It is easy to make glib comments, but, speaking as an informed observer, I would seek the involvement of the Serious Fraud Office. With respect, there seems to be only two choices in relation to official actions and official offences committed here. Either the Minister is appropriately referring this matter for an inquiry under section 14 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 or—frankly—the Serious Fraud Office needs to get off its backside and investigate this matter properly, bringing people who are committing these particular offences to justice. Clearly, there is the potential—I can go no further than that—that criminal offences of conspiracy to defraud have taken place.

An awful lot of questions have been raised, and I do not want to repeat the points that other hon. Members have made, but we come back to the question why an investment advertised as a

"safe and cautious fund—ideal for pension transfer"

has so damaged people's lives. We must move on to the simple question how to stop it happening again.

To deal first with the compensation package, given that the funds were suspended in March 2009, one might have imagined that it would have been put forward a little earlier. The delay by those involved and their dilatory tactics are to their discredit. However, the £54 million package is inadequate. Let us be blunt: Capita is a substantial company. There may be arguments about whether the company in question is limited within the confines of Capita's many companies, or about the parent company not being responsible for the individual failings of individual people in other lesser companies in the group. Those may be perfectly legitimate comments, and if Capita wants to take that high financial moral tone with us, so be it. However, it needs to grasp that it has a simple choice in this Parliament. Either it provides 100% compensation or it will find that it has few friends in this House. The £54 million is frankly not sufficient. This is not like Equitable Life, because this is not a situation in which a company has run out of money. Capita has not gone bust. To quote one investor who wrote to me:

"The current package is barely a pinprick on Capita's little finger."

Sir Peter Bottomley: I hope that hon. Members will not mind my saying that this calls to mind the troubles of Arthur Andersen, where one problem in one country led to the destruction of a very good business in a number of other countries.

Guy Opperman: I endorse those comments. Capita will need to look over its shoulder after today's debate.

Tristram Hunt: Does the hon. Gentleman not think, then, that the Government have a role to play in relation to the extraordinary award of contracts to Capita?

Guy Opperman: I accept that they have a role to a degree. The hon. Gentleman is being a little naive, because the provision of certain services by a perfectly reputable part of the company is satisfactory, and he is far too intelligent not to know that. However, we must deal with individual mismanagement by parts of the company, which happened in years gone by, and the hon. Gentleman knows that companies have obligations in relation to such matters. The matter can be pursued either as a civil obligation in the High Court or by way of criminal compensation arising out of a prosecution. Alternatively, it can be dealt with under section 14 of the Financial Services Act 2010. However, it is over-simplistic to say that just because the Government provide contracts to an organisation that is performing perfectly satisfactorily in some respects, they cannot be involved in seeking other compensation.

This debate is an opportunity for the Government to give a lead on what they will do, and they need to answer some questions. I want to discuss examples involving a couple of my constituents. The point has been fairly made that the losses have been suffered by people who are not wealthy. We are not standing up for toffs and fat cats, but for people who have lost £1,000, £2,000, £5,000, £10,000 or £15,000— people who have lost their life savings, and who were encouraged to put their money in.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument, building on some other powerful speeches. He is right about the people involved, and the same is true of my constituents, who are not wealthy but who were doing the right thing. Our party and all other parties have asked people to make provision for their pension and retirement. Those people were doing the responsible thing, and they had their fingers badly burned. Confidence has been mentioned, and the Government must address that.

Guy Opperman: I totally endorse that point, and that is where the Government definitely have a role. They can use the inadequacies of the present case to highlight their intention to come down hard on those who mismanage investments as in this instance, to give investors confidence in other investments in the future. Sadly, that should have been done previously, and such scams and difficulties have been bubbling over for the past 20 years.

My constituent, Mr Ian Robinson, transferred his entire pension pot of £90,000 into Arch Cru on the advice of an independent financial adviser. He thought it was a sensible policy. In 2009, his funds were revalued down to about £55,000; they were then frozen; and the remaining capital was eroded over the next two years.

[Guy Opperman]

He will be lucky to get 40% back under the compensation package. Another constituent, who wants to remain nameless, worked all his life and built up a business. He sold it and thought that he and his wife had a successful pension pot of several hundred thousand pounds. They put all of it—savings and pension—into Arch Cru. After the devastating effects of what happened, he and his wife have been living off a state pension and with the current offer of recompense they will be forced to downsize to enable them to live from any capital that is released. They will have lost hundreds of thousands of pounds, which they thought was securely invested to provide a gentle but secure return, and they will be lucky to be able to leave anything to their dependants. If my constituent agrees to the package at this stage, he will have less than half the compensation needed to put him and his wife back in the position they were in prior to their investment. In the current climate, we should support such hard-working people.

Much could be said about the dilatoriness of the process, because, as other hon. Members have mentioned, nothing has really happened since suspension in March 2009. I shall briefly discuss Capita. Others have spoken eloquently and forcefully about its inadequacy in its role. One constituent told me:

> "This is not just a case of an investment that has underperformed due to the Global Financial Crisis but one where there are serious misgivings in relation to the management and governance of the funds".

That is certainly how I see the matter—it is potentially a criminal investigation. Capita was paid as trustees to oversee the management of the funds, which we all agree it simply did not do. Therefore why is Capita not fully accountable for the extent of the losses of the people whose money it was managing? Clearly it is vicariously liable and has an obligation.

Hugh Aldous has prepared a report on Capita, and I recommend that anyone who has not taken on board the full level of ineptitude should read it. It is clear from the report, in which Hugh Aldous makes multiple observations, that the net asset values of several of the cells that were invested in were overstated at least from 2007 onwards. He reported that the condition of the physical assets was far worse than

> "we reasonably expected and, in some cases, frankly appalling."

It seems inexplicable that small investors should suffer so severely with an inadequate package.

Several hon. Members have spoken about the compensation package, and the Minister must address two points. Why on earth has a closed offer been made, when it is also time-limited? That is wrong. The Minister must assist hon. Members by giving the reason for that and telling us whether the Government will do anything about it. Everything would change if the Minister were to say that it is an interim offer. If it were an interim offer, so that the victims of the scam could receive the £54 million paid down in the usual way, with the right to continue to take civil action if they wanted to pursue matters further, I would say, "So be it." However, to tell them that it is a time-limited £54 million offer and they can take it or leave it is wrong.

The FSA has supposedly been making great efforts to ensure that companies can meet their commitments when they fall down. There are regulations to protect consumers. The FSA is a publicly funded body. It exists to protect investors, and it has not done so in this case. It should surely have launched a proper investigation. My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan has called for a proper investigation, and I repeat that call. The FSA seems reluctant to admit that Capita has failed in its duty as an authorised corporate director.

Naomi Long: The hon. Gentleman is making some strong points. Does he agree that in this crisis it is the failure of the regulatory aspect that has caused the biggest ripples in public confidence? People took the FSA's regulation of the funds and the advice they were given at face value, which created a level of confidence that did not match the confusion about what was happening within the fund. The FSA has not only failed people but caused a crisis in public confidence.

Guy Opperman: I endorse the hon. Lady's comments about the authority.

There are tremendous financial consequences here, but there is also a human one. All hon. Members—I have been here for only 18 months, but others have been here for many years—will have gone through the pain, difficulty and correspondence in relation to Equitable Life. To be fair, this situation is not the same, but it is similar in that constituents have written to me because they have given up. One told me about a retired couple in ill health who have already given up, because

> "they have not the energy or the mental resolve to fight this".

The Minister had an extremely difficult job with Equitable Life, and I applaud the fact that he did the best he could in very difficult circumstances. This matter, however, is far simpler, and I hope that he takes on board the four key points. First, will the inquiry be a section 14 inquiry? Secondly, why is the offer a closed one? Thirdly, why is the offer deadlined and time-limited? Fourthly, does the Minister agree with a large proportion of hon. Members—I say this based on the comments that have been made during the past hour and 11 minutes—that Capita has a simple choice: either it gives 100% compensation, or it is left with no friends in this House?

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I shall call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10.45 am. I now call Duncan Hames.

10.42 am

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): I shall certainly be brief, Mr Owen, as I, too, look forward to the Minister's speech about cleaning up the mess of financial scandals that arose long before he took office. I am not alone; it is worth reiterating that we have heard this morning from MPs from six political parties, and 5% of all MPs have turned up for a debate lasting only 90 minutes, knowing full well that barely a fifth of them would get to make speeches. My first point to Capita and all the bodies involved is that there is a lot of interest in this House and that their reputation in all parts of the United Kingdom is therefore at stake. I hope that they do not wish their companies to become the household names that others have in disputes that this House has unfortunately had to deal with.

Officials in the building across the road will have urged the Minister to bat questions away to the Financial Services Authority, and will have suggested that he speak of the FSA's independence and of how this matter is for that authority and not for the Government.

Our collective presence here this morning will have made it clear to him that the public interest is too strong to accept that. In addition to the complaints about the companies involved, many of our constituents are asking: who regulates the regulators? They do not trust the regulators' handling of the matter. This morning, we have come here with reasonable questions that have not been answered in our correspondence with the FSA on constituents' behalf. How did the FSA authorise the fund in the first place? Why did it not respond sooner to the informed criticism of experienced fund managers? Does the scope of the FSA's investigation extend to questions about its own conduct, and does the review team have the independence to do that effectively? Even clearer are our constituents' concerns about how the payment deal is being agreed, and about how the FSA is able to bind the Financial Ombudsman Service so securely to Capita's proposals.

When such questions are being raised about the regulator, it falls to the Minister to reassure Members that he is totally on top of their concerns. I hope that he addresses the plea for a full inquiry that has been made across the House this morning, and I look forward to him throwing his weight behind the demands for a section 14 inquiry.

10.45 am

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex), and to the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) and other Members, for drawing attention to this exceptionally important and complex issue. It is simply not right that people, many of whom have worked hard on modest incomes and have saved money in what they reasonably thought to be a responsible way, stand to lose significant sums. We welcome the Financial Services Authority's efforts in securing a compensatory offer from the parties involved, which will be administered through the Capita financial managers, but although up to 70% of the sum invested could be returned to investors via the consumer redress scheme, many will be dissatisfied because the amount falls far short of their original investment.

I want to make five quick points. First, on the unfair constraints on the choices for out-of-pocket investors, there have been reports that the FSA is reluctant to set out a full statement of events surrounding the Arch Cru failure, possibly until after the closure of the redress scheme. I would be grateful if the Minister would agree that that would be an extremely unfortunate state of affairs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) have indicated. The FSA should either set out its understanding and explanation while the redress scheme is extant, or the scheme's closing date should be extended to allow the full facts to emerge before investors are forced to decide whether to accept the final settlement. Does the Minister agree that that would be reasonable?

Secondly, can the Minister clarify the potential role of the Financial Services Compensation Scheme? The FSA has been brokering the voluntary settlement scheme, but at what point will the option of claiming anything via the FSCS be made clear to investors?

Thirdly, I want to ask about the lessons to be learnt about Capita and the role of the regulators. Irregular practices clearly took place, and an investigation into the regulator's handling of the Arch Cru scandal is merited. Hon. Friends are pressing the Minister and the Treasury to look into the behaviour of the regulator, and I would be grateful if the Minister could address that in winding up the debate. Did the regulators check Capita's capabilities? Compliance work is usually done by banks, but the Arch Cru fund was compliance-managed by Capita and, as we have heard, questions have been asked about the adequacy of Capita's business resourcing and its internal checking procedures for ensuring the thoroughness of its important responsibilities.

Fourthly, we must have tighter regulation of investment fund descriptions, and there is an urgent need to ensure that consumers are protected from exaggerated marketing terms. For instance, do we need clearer rules about the use of terms such as "cautious fund"? The hon. Member for Hexham highlighted the term "ideal for pension transfer", which goes to the nub of the marketing mispractice involved. "Guaranteed investment," "absolute returns" and "balanced funds" are all used frequently in investment schemes, but I am not sure that we have the right regulation of the use of marketing arrangements.

Finally, although we should not underestimate the pain, anger and distress that many people justifiably feel, we must consider the messages that this kind of scandal sends out to the public at large. This situation can serve only to undermine people's confidence in saving for their future, doing the right thing by planning ahead and putting money aside through pensions and investments. Parliamentarians and the Government must consider not only the impact of the scandal on the people directly affected but its repercussions on people's trust in financial products more widely.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I thank Members for their inventions and for keeping to time. I ask the Minister now to respond.

10.49 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Mark Hoban): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Tom Greatrex) on securing this debate and on how he introduced it. Despite a barrage of interventions, he managed to maintain his pace and tone and set out a clear narrative of what happened to Arch Cru. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) on his tenacious pursuit of the matter, as well as the other hon. Members who have taken part in the debate.

I express my sympathy to the many Arch Cru investors who have lost a significant proportion of their savings as a consequence of the events that we are discussing. Regardless of how large or small the investment was, and whether they have lost all their savings or a fraction, they have lost out. It is important to think carefully about the cause and what lessons need to be learned.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames) rightly predicted, I must add a note of caution about Treasury responsibilities in the matter. We do not have investigative or prosecuting powers of our own. The Financial Services Authority is the independent regulator. I have spoken to its chief executive

[Mr Mark Hoban]

about Arch Cru and sought further information about the FSA's investigations and the voluntary compensation package, and I will respond as fully as I can to the points made today. Hon. Members clearly have an appetite for a lot more detail. I understand, as I have the same appetite, but enforcement action is ongoing, so there is a limit to what can be disclosed in the House.

As the hon. Gentleman and others have said, the case is complex and involves multiple layers of responsibility. Many investors will initially have engaged with Arch Cru's UK open-ended investment companies, or OEICs, through their independent financial advisers, with Cru Investment Management conducting the marketing of the OEICs. The management of the OEICs was then the responsibility of Capita Financial Managers Ltd as authorised corporate directors and of BNY Mellon Trust & Depositary (UK) Ltd and HSBC Bank plc as depositaries. Although the legal form is that Arch Financial Products acted as the delegated investment manager, in substance, it approached Capita and proposed that fund structure.

The OEICs invested principally in more than 22 Guernsey-domiciled incorporated cell companies, which were listed on the Channel Island stock exchange and required to comply with Guernsey regulations. The cell companies had two independent directors. The administrator of the cell companies was regulated by the Guernsey Financial Services Commission and was responsible, among other tasks, for producing valuations for the cell companies, which were made available to the Channel Island stock exchange. Arch was the investment manager for the cell companies and, of course, the OEICs themselves. Both the OEICs and the Guernsey cell companies were independently audited. That complex structure should make it clear that it is not easy to apportion full responsibility to any single player in the matter.

As part of the authorisation process for UK OEICs, the FSA assesses a fund's proposition before launch and decides whether it complies with the rules. The FSA then reviews the fund's prospectus and, after authorisation, continues its normal supervisory activity, which includes visits to authorised corporate directors and depositaries and thematic work such as the monitoring of financial promotions. As hon. Members have identified, the FSA does not regulate descriptions of funds, such as "cautious managed". It is worth reflecting on what "cautious managed" means. It means that a fund invests in a range of assets with a set maximum equity exposure and a minimum exposure to fixed interests and cash. A minimum percentage of assets must also be held in sterling or euro-denominated assets. That describes what such funds should be.

The FSA is not an auditor and does not check underlying investments or the veracity of share prices. That is the responsibility of others. The regulatory regime is not a zero-failure regime, and the FSA conducts risk-based supervision. It does not visit every firm every year; the frequency of visits depends on firms' risk and impact. If hon. Members reflect on that for a moment, they will expect more resources to be devoted to a big insurer than to an insurance broker on the high street. However, it is ultimately the responsibility of the firms involved to ensure that they comply with all the relevant rules.

What did the FSA do in this situation? It has been suggested that the FSA let down investors, but its financial promotions monitoring activity picked up some of the issues with Arch Cru OEICs, which were raised with the parties involved. Crucially, in October 2008, during the course of an ARROW inspection visit, the FSA identified issues with the funds, including the fulfilment of the OEICs' investment objectives. Those issues were raised with Capita Financial Managers, the authorised corporate director, leading to the suspension of the OEICs in March 2009.

On the payment scheme, it should be clear from my opening remarks that the structure underpinning investment in an Arch Cru fund was complex and multi-layered. The FSA could have pursued a comprehensive package of redress, which would have needed agreement from all the parties involved, some of which were responsible for the management of the funds and some for their sale or promotion. Not all those parties are regulated by the FSA or based in the UK. To have put together such a package would have been time-consuming and complex. The FSA has reached agreement with the three parties responsible for the management of the UK OEICs: Capita, BNY Mellon and HSBC. The package was announced in June 2011, and will pay up to £54 million to investors. The amount of compensation takes into account distributions already made to investors and the remaining value of the funds.

The compensation amount also has an element of proportionality, taking into account the fact that while those three parties share some of the responsibility for the losses, they are not solely responsible. Other parties contributed to the failure, and the FSA is currently considering the positions of those other parties. The pursuit of a voluntary settlement with the three parties allows investors to opt to receive payments by the end of this year rather than having to wait several years for the uncertain outcome of a more complex process, which would include enforcement action against the relevant parties. It is a trade-off. Do we want investors, some of whom invested all their funds in Arch Cru, to receive money sooner or later? A question was asked about time scales. People have until the end of next year to decide whether to opt for the package.

The FSA has required the Financial Ombudsman Service to apply the payment scheme to complaints that it receives, under the provisions of the Financial Services Act 2010, which was introduced by the previous Government and supported by us. The provisions ensure certainty to investors and a consistent regulatory approach between the FOS and the FSA. Without them, the FOS would have to consider individual cases on their own merit rather than applying the same principle to every investor. I will explain what the FOS is bound to.

Alun Cairns: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hoban: No, I will continue. I have three minutes left and more points to make.

The FOS is bound only in respect of complaints made against Capita, HSBC and BNY Mellon. Complaints made to the FOS about other parties to the investment chain, including independent financial advisers, can still be heard by the FOS. The limitation on the FOS applies only to complaints made about the three parties. That is a clear signal to investors that they can make further complaints about other parties. Investors are free to pursue action through the courts and to challenge the IFA who advised them to invest in Arch Cru funds over whether that advice was appropriate. Numerous people have already done so. If they are not satisfied with the IFA's response, they can go to the FOS. If a complaint has been upheld but the adviser is no longer in business, investors can also complain to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme and apply for compensation.

Guy Opperman: Will the Minister give way on that issue?

Mr Hoban: No, I cannot. I have two minutes left. My hon. Friend and others asked about section 14, which I would like to address; I am sure that he will be grateful if I do.

I have yet to be persuaded that a section 14 inquiry is appropriate. It certainly would not be appropriate to announce one while enforcement action is being taken against any party to the matter. The powers are available where it appears that significant damage has been done to the interests of consumers that might not have occurred but for a serious failure of regulation. It is worth pointing out that the power has never been used. Throughout the life of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, many issues have not been examined.

As I have said, it is not the FSA's role to ensure that no firm ever fails, to approve the investment strategy of every OEIC operating in the UK or to ensure that all investments are sound. The FSA does not audit or sign off an OEIC's accounts. That responsibility rests elsewhere. It was the FSA, through its ARROW inspection, that identified the issues in Arch Cru.

It is vital that everyone engaged in the matter—the regulator, industry players, IFAs and others—reflects on the lessons learned. Many issues emerge, including the scheme's complexity and consumers' need for better financial education and better-quality advice. We look carefully at every lesson learned from such cases, and that is reflected in our thinking on the operation of the FSA.

Dangerous Dogs

11 am

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate, which I think has been welcomed by all parties in the House and by areas throughout the country. For that reason, I hope we can keep the debate on the strictly all-party basis it deserves. That will certainly be the tenor of my remarks throughout.

More than 6,000 postmen a year are bitten or attacked in one form or another by dogs. There are approximately 10 attacks per constituency per year, so it is a matter in which we all have a direct and important interest. Indeed, the devolved Parliament in Scotland has legislated on the issue, and Northern Ireland is in the process of doing so.

The reason why I have called for this debate relates to a nasty incident in Coventry involving a young girl, Alicia Foskett, whose mother, Sarah, has, without a great deal of encouragement, led a campaign. Under existing law, the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 excludes private property from any criminal provision, so Sarah Foskett felt that, at best, she got passive help from the police and local council. That might be understandable in the context of the present law, which I wish to address. I hope to leave as much time as I can for the Minister and other MPs to respond, but I cannot leave too much time because it is only a half hour debate. The support for Sarah Foskett seemed inadequate, so she led a strong and courageous single-woman campaign to raise the profile of the issue in Coventry and has done extremely well. I am pleased to say that the police are now giving her a lot of support in the civil action she intends to take.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): It is only after the event that the police are actually doing something. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a pity they did not do something beforehand?

Mr Robinson: I agree. They should have given much more positive support beforehand, but they could not take any action under the existing legislation. I will come back to that in a moment, but it is one of the principal things that needs to be addressed. As things stand, the case is for a civil action rather than criminal proceedings.

As I have said, this is not a party political issue. Indeed, the Prime Minister in a letter to the Communication Workers Union just before the election, when he was Leader of the Opposition, made it clear that he and the Conservative party were very much in favour of the action that I wish to recommend. He wrote:

> "We support extending dangerous dogs law to cover all places including private property".

That is a clear statement from the then Leader of the Opposition and now Prime Minister. I hope that the Government can find some impetus in the light of that support.

The more general statistics are interesting, but I will not detain hon. Members with them for too long. I have already mentioned that 6,000 postal workers are injured

[Mr Robinson]

every year. Some 2,500 adults and 2,700 children are treated for injuries every year. In the past four years, six children and two adults have been killed. The attacks seem to come in spates. The past few years have seen a further spate of attacks in London that have been so bad that the Met has set up its own special dog unit in response.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): A constituent of mine, Mr Naylor, has asked me to raise this very point with my hon. Friend. The burden on the authorities and the taxpayers is growing daily because of the lack of control and responsibility exercised by owners. We need more control over the behaviour of owners, whether that be via an insurance policy—that idea has been floated in the past—or some other mechanism. We cannot have the general public picking up the bill for irresponsible dog owners.

Mr Robinson: Getting all dog owners to pay into an insurance fund relating to a small minority of dogs would tar everybody with the same brush. Over the centuries, dogs have been man's greatest friend. They are appreciated in families such as mine and by children. That idea would also be grossly unfair at a time of extreme stringency for all families. It is a question of getting the owners to change their behaviour and become responsible. I regret to say that that is a more general problem throughout society at present.

In the case of Mrs Foskett, the owner refused to even have the dog looked at. He shunted it off to a friend. We do not know where it is yet, but it continues to be on private premises and to pose a danger, which is not good enough. He even refused to have the dog put under the temporary care of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals while it undertook training. That is, by any standards, irresponsible behaviour. I agree with my hon. Friend that part of the solution is to change that, but the application of criminal law—the greatest sanction the country can impose on any individual—would be a good step forward. Making the law apply to individual premises would begin the change of mindset that my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) are seeking.

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and I congratulate his constituent on her work. Does he agree that it is not the breed of dog that seems to be the problem? It seems to be a problem with all dogs. A common theme seems to be that cases are not treated as seriously as they could be by the police, and that far greater resources need to be given to making prosecutions.

Mr Robinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and agree with her to some extent. In Scotland, they have brought the "deed, not the breed" distinction into play. I do not know how useful that would be; I would go for "and the breed". It was a Staffordshire bull terrier that was involved in the incident in my constituency, and there was dreadful scarring to the young girl's face. The breeds are fairly identifiable. Indeed, the Met's conclusion is that they are being bred in London by young men and others almost as trophy items to display. That is a problem, and I do not think that we lose anything by having a category. It should also be made clear that no other breed of dog is excluded, and that the criminal law will apply to them if there is any doubt, which I do not think there is.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): An additional issue that has been brought to my attention by some of my constituents is attacks by out-of-control dogs on wildlife, particularly swans. There has been a distressing increase in the number of swans killed or injured by dogs. At present, rescue groups such as the Gwent Swan Rescue, which is now called Swan Rescue South Wales, cannot claim back the veterinary fees from irresponsible owners. Surely that must be put right.

Mr Robinson: I agree. This is pointing towards a consolidation of all previous laws—many of them go back many years; one of the most useful was enacted in 1871—into new, modern statutes to deal with some of the points that are not clear in previous legislation. In addition to dogs attacking defenceless, beautiful animals such as swans, I have even heard of dogs attacking guide dogs. It largely comes back to the owner. We must put in place the sanctions that make it clear we are not going to tolerate this situation any more.

Without rehearsing the whole history of the issue, I shall give hon. Members a flavour of it. Related Acts were introduced in 1839, 1847, 1861 and 1871. This is, therefore, a recurrent theme in society and our pet community. It is no good denying the problem; we must simply do the best we can to minimise it, even if we cannot totally eliminate it. That means introducing sensible, modern legislation. I hope that some Conservative Members have time—as they can probably tell, I am trying to get through my speech as quickly as I can to leave time for others to speak—to join us in supporting such an approach. The consultation has been carried out, and finished in June 2010.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that two clear things need to be done? First, the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 needs to be got rid of and replaced by sensible, effective legislation; and secondly, we need a workable law that introduces compulsory micro-chipping for all dogs.

Mr Robinson: I am coming to that in a moment. I agree with the hon. Gentleman but the point is: why are we not getting on with it? We must face the fact that we need legislation to deal with the problem and, if we all agree on that, we could go one step further and say that it needs to be consolidated. Let us have fresh legislation that takes all recent experience into account. This is not a criticism of the Prime Minister, the Government or the Conservative party, but the consultation was completed a year and a half ago and I cannot think what is holding things up. There is widespread support in the House for dealing with this problem, which exists throughout the country, so let us get on with sorting it out.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have consensus among a range of organisations—such as the Kennel Club, the dog wardens' body and, indeed, the postal services union—on the need to introduce consolidated legislation that works in the 21st century?

Mr Robinson: Absolutely. I could not agree more. We have little influence with the Government these days, but the question is whether Conservative Members can influence the Government to get on and produce the legislation. This is a time of party political tensions. There have been bitter disputes in the House about the economy, social welfare and a range of issues, and it is difficult for parties to agree in this time of extreme danger in the economic sphere; but this is an issue on which we could get ahead, do something useful and be united. The country would feel much better for it. There is every reason for taking action.

I will finish my speech by 11.15 am. It is only a half hour debate, and I hope that the Minister will not take too much time and that others can contribute if they still wish to do so. I am not going to legislate now, but essentially, the basis of the new legislation should definitely be to extend the criminal law so that section 3 of the 1991 Act includes private premises. We also need to consider the issue of micro-chipping. As the hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said, there is widespread agreement among, for example, the Dogs Trust and the Kennel Club. Everyone recognises the need to deal with these issues—even those on which we are not known for agreeing. We could push ahead, but we should do so sensibly and clearly.

We should also consider the issue of dog control notices. The no-fault personal injury compensation scheme should not be paid for by all dog owners. That is unfair and unnecessary. There must be some other approach—one that does not impact, I hasten to add, on the public purse.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): Much has been made of the fact that breed-specific legislation does not seem to work. Does my hon. Friend know of any analysis of whether such accidents or attacks are breed-specific? We seem to be talking simply about statements made by one side or the other.

Mr Robinson: I made a statement, for which I do not have any statistics, based on my personal impression—which may well be wrong—and the examples I have seen in and around my constituency and in London. In Scotland, for example, they have rejected that view and are taking a deed-based approach. However, by definition, such an approach accepts that damage has to be done before action can be taken. I do not know what the phrase "deed and breed" might add to the legislation, or whether it might confuse matters; but I am not against that approach.

Katy Clark: If the list is breed-specific, people simply swap breeds and find new ones. That is one of the reasons why looking at the deed is considered more helpful.

Mr Robinson: I am grateful for that intervention. Of course, that is why I said that we cannot focus just on the breed; we also need to consider the deed. We do need, however, to focus a little on the breed, just to make people conscious that other breeds are available. To ditch that approach after a certain amount of effort has been put into it would be unnecessary.

I have covered the personal injury compensation scheme and micro-chipping. Tougher penalties for and punishment of irresponsible owners should be applied through the criminal law. That would be the single most important legislative action we could take to influence owners' behaviour, which is clearly what we must do.

I will now open the debate to others who wish to take part. All I am saying is this: it has come to the point when we owe it to ourselves, our constituents and the young children and adults who have been scarred for life by these dogs, to deal with such legislation properly. We need to produce something that is comprehensive, clear and up to date. That is the minimum we can do to prevent such scars from blighting people's lives in future.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con) *rose—*

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab) *rose—*

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. Two Members are indicating that they want to speak. I will call the Minister at 11.20 am, so they can share the four minutes between them. They can do the maths.

11.16 am

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on securing this important debate. I agree with much of what he has said, particularly about the criminal law needing to be much tighter on the irresponsible ownership of dogs. In most cases, it is the humans who are at fault, not the dogs. Possession of a violent dog has caused catastrophe in the hon. Gentleman's constituency in Coventry. If it can be proven that an owner has trained that animal to be aggressive, it should be an aggravating factor and fall under the criminal law.

I shall offer a slightly different view on the issue of "deeds not breeds," which I am erring in favour of. The breed issue is not clear. The pit bull terrier is not a single breed of dog; it is a generic name and a grouping that contains several breeds of dog, including the popular Staffordshire bull terrier. If handled in the correct manner, the Staffordshire bull terrier is an affectionate and loving family pet. A dog bearing just one or two of the physical characteristics associated with a pit bull terrier can be classified in law as a pit bull terrier. The implication of that for anyone who complains to the police about a neighbour with an animal bearing just one of the characteristics of that dog type is that the police are mandatorily enforced to take that dog away from that owner. My visit out with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals the week before last to mark world animal day confirmed that such an approach can be very unfair indeed, because unfortunately many of the calls the RSPCA get from members of the public are malicious. I ask the Minister to take that into account.

11.18 am

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Just briefly, I support and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on his call for the consolidation of existing laws into a new statute. I will not repeat everything that he has said and instead make two further points.

First, I found out today from a written parliamentary question that 892 people were admitted to hospital last year in Yorkshire and the Humber alone as a result of

[Angela Smith]

dog attacks. If we can establish the average cost for those admissions as opposed to accident and emergency attendances, I am sure we will find that, overall, there is a significant multi-million pound cost in England to the Exchequer. That underlines the argument that I have always made, which is that the improvement of existing legislation and an addition to available resources, particularly to local authorities to enable them to enforce legislation and engage in education and prevention activities with dog owners, will be an investment that will actually result in a reduction in public spending. At the moment, we spend a great deal of money on treating people who have suffered in the way mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West.

The consultation finished in June 2010. It is now October 2011. The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Mr Paice) pointed out in July in this Chamber that action must be taken, yet we still have no response from the Department. We must have an answer to the consultation soon. I hope that the Minister will today give us a date for a response to the consultation.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on raising this important subject. When the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Mr Paice) replied to the debate on dangerous dogs in July, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), he made it clear that the Government were sympathetic to hon. Members in all parts of the House who feel that the existing law is in need of an overhaul.

The Government recognise the difficulties faced by those who find themselves in the front line dealing with irresponsible dog ownership in communities. No one can fail to be shocked by the savagery described by the hon. Member for Coventry North West, the savagery of dog attacks that we have all seen in the media and by the several deaths in the past few years that have been mentioned by hon. Members. We understand the very real concerns about safety and the impact on communities. We also recognise the immense pressure on dog rescue centres as they see an ever-increasing rise in the number of Staffordshire bull crosses—so-called status dogs. I wish that we could somehow get away from using that phrase, as it indicates some sort of status for the people who use dogs in a malign way. Calling them "stupid people's dogs", or something like that, might be more relevant. Very often, these dogs are cruelly abandoned by their owners, and we often forget that in this debate.

There are no easy answers to this problem. We do not want to rush into changes to the existing law without giving thought as to whether they will work. We want to be sure that any changes will have a real impact on reducing instances of irresponsible dog ownership, particularly dog attacks.

I would like to update the Chamber on the progress made since July, and I hope that that will answer the point raised by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith). Ministers and officials have continued to work across Government and with key stakeholders such as the police, local authorities, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and the Kennel Club. Contrary to what has been said, those organisations do not all share precisely the same view on how the law should be changed. Indeed, differences have been suggested in the Chamber today. However, they have all been very helpful in letting us know their views and helping us to refine our thinking about what should be done.

As the consultation that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs held last year showed, the issue of dangerous dogs covers a range of concerns, from thoughtless and irresponsible ownership, up to deliberately using a dog as a weapon to intimidate and harass others. As a result, a number of agencies and interested parties are involved. Earlier this year, the Home Office concluded a consultation on a more effective approach to antisocial behaviour. That new approach is intended to reform the toolkit available for tackling antisocial behaviour, including that relating to dogs.

When launching the consultation, the Home Secretary made it clear that the Government expect everyone to have a right to feel safe in their home and in their neighbourhood. She said that antisocial behaviour should be a priority for local agencies, including police, councils and social landlords. She underlined the fact that we need a new approach to problems that are fundamentally local. The proposals include streamlining the toolkit used to tackle antisocial behaviour, so that police and partners have faster, more flexible and more effective tools; sweeping away a swathe of statutory powers, so that the police have simple, intelligible powers that they can use when necessary; and giving victims and communities the right to force the authorities to take action, where the authorities have failed to do so.

I realise that there are concerns that a simpler approach by the Home Office will somehow overlook the problem of dogs being used to intimidate others, but that is simply not the case. Ministers and officials are continuing to work closely with the Home Office to ensure that dogs are not overlooked in the new framework and that the police, local authorities and local communities continue to be able, where appropriate, to develop their own solutions to dog problems that do not necessarily involve the courts and criminal sanctions. That may answer the point made by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge. In the next month, we expect the precise details from the Home Office about how it feels this should be taken forward. We will then be able to involve that in what we are saying.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Will the Minister cover the issue of private property and the loophole in the law that allows 4,000 postal workers to be attacked without any prosecution being brought?

Richard Benyon: I am coming on to that precise point. Ministers have made it a priority to see how this issue is being dealt with on the ground in the communities that are affected. We are keen to learn the lessons of what works—and what does not—from local projects in areas where there is a high incidence of dog-related problems. Our view is that local action is key to tackling the problem of irresponsible dog ownership. We are keen to support local people, charities, the police and local authorities, so that they can jointly tackle local issues. We are also looking at what more Government can do to support the police, local government and the courts in dealing more effectively with dog problems. We have already facilitated the production of guidance for the police, the courts and the public. We have also provided financial support for the training given by the Association of Chief Police Officers to police dog legislation officers. Ministers are keen that we build on this support in future.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Benyon: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I am coming to the point that he raised earlier.

A number of people support the idea that if breed-specific legislation is not repealed, then owners should be allowed to apply to the courts to have the dogs added to the index of exempted dogs. I want the police to have the final say on whether a dog is seized, and there may also be scope for not kennelling other types of dogs that are not a danger. In all cases, the police would need to be satisfied that the dogs are in the care of a responsible owner. That idea would undoubtedly save money for the police who, under the existing law, must first seize the dog pending the outcome of court proceedings. However, we also need to consider whether such a proposal would allow for the public safety factor of each application to be properly considered.

On the point raised by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), another proposal under consideration is to extend the criminal law on dangerous dogs to all private property. That would allow the police to investigate dog attacks on private property, and we have sympathy with that desire. That may, on the face of it, be an easy thing to do, but we should consider the effects of, say, a trespasser with criminal intent who is attacked by the home owner's dog. Do we really want a trespasser successfully prosecuting a home owner because the home owner's dog has acted in a way that many people would consider only natural? I point that out as just one example of where it is not a simple binary decision. There are some major implications in extending the law into the home. Before going down this route, we would need to be sure that all the potential risks are understood and can be addressed, but I assure the hon. Lady that we get the problem and are very keen to move position, which I think all hon. Members would—

Mr Robinson: The Minister said a moment ago that not all organisations agree about every detail—that is true, and they never will. However, what everybody agrees on is the extension of criminal law, and everybody agrees with a natural exemption if there is a trespasser or a burglar. That happens in all criminal law. It is not a real problem, unless the Minister wants to make it one. We have no timetable for any sort of legislation to deal with the issue.

Richard Benyon: We are mindful of that point. We believe that we can get through it, but it indicates how the issue is not straightforward.

Turning to the point made by my hon. Friends the Members for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and for Romsey and Southampton North about microchipping, I worked closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Romford on this issue before the election. There are obvious side benefits to the compulsory micro-chipping of dogs, one of them being the ability to identify the owner of a dog that has become dangerously out of control even if the owner is not present at the time of the incident. Better traceability of owners could discourage them from letting their dogs run loose, and hence reduce the likelihood of attacks. However, I consider that the principal benefit is that it would enable the police, local authorities and rescue centres to reunite lost and stolen dogs with their owners. It may also help where dogs have been stolen, which is a big issue in my constituency. That is an important step forward, and one that I believe that we can support, but would it reach the problem owners we are talking about? That is a fundamental point that we have to consider.

Michael Connarty: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Benyon: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I have just a few seconds left, and I want to say that the Government take this issue very seriously. It is a complex issue that spans many areas of undesirable behaviour from thoughtless and irresponsible dog owners.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Ministry of Defence (Procurement)

[MR JIM HOOD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): It is good to have you in the Chair for the debate this afternoon, Mr Hood, and I apologise for its wide-ranging nature. A number of Ministers have responsibility for Ministry of Defence procurement, which I know has presented something of a dilemma as to who should respond to the debate. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff), appears to have drawn the ministerial short straw, and I appreciate that he might not be able to answer fully some of the issues raised. However, if necessary, I am more than happy to receive a delayed response from his appropriate ministerial colleague.

The issues are varied but a common theme runs through them: the apparent flaw in how contracts are negotiated by the Ministry of Defence. The first such contract to mention is a memorandum of understanding signed between the British MOD and the Canadian Department of National Defence, an agreement about the British Army training unit, Suffield—BATUS for short—which is sited at the Canadian forces base at Suffield in Alberta, Canada. In case my words are taken as a criticism of the coalition Government, God forbid, or its immediate predecessor, I should point out that although the current agreement was signed in July 2006, the original one was signed way back in 1972. I have a copy of that agreement and, in all my experience in the contracts industry, I have never seen a more one-sided document. Not only does the agreement give to the Canadian Government the final say in how BATUS is operated, down to who is employed on the base and from whom and from where equipment is purchased—I will come to that aspect in a moment—but it is also my understanding that the financial split between the two Governments is such that the British pay 80% of all the costs and the Canadians 20%. Bizarrely, however, nowhere in the documents are those figures spelt out explicitly.

The effects of the agreement are plain to see by anyone who visits BATUS, as I did recently with colleagues from the armed forces parliamentary scheme. Let me give a couple of examples. Administration on the base is shared between Canada and Britain, but three or four Canadian civilians work there, compared with one Brit. That is hardly surprising if we consider that the Canadians decide who is employed but the British taxpayer picks up 80% of the bill for employing such people. On the equipment side, earlier this year the Army decided to withdraw its helicopters from Belize and wanted to transfer them for use at BATUS in support of battleground exercises. The Canadians refused and insisted that British forces at BATUS lease Canadian helicopters piloted by a Canadian civilian from a Canadian company. That is not a good use of British taxpayers' money.

On the subject of helicopters, to save money BATUS has now stopped using helicopters as part of its battlefield training exercises, apart from in a support role. That is a false economy because the lack of proper training could put at risk members of our armed forces during any future active service in which helicopters might be needed to transport soldiers to the front line. The cost of using helicopters during annual training exercises is estimated at £100,000—a small price to pay for a soldier's life. If the MOD wants to find that money, let me say where it can be found.

At BATUS, there is a range control building, which is used to monitor vehicles accessing and leaving the training area. It is sited at the beginning of Rattlesnake road—yes, there are rattlesnakes on the prairie, to which my colleagues and I will bear witness—but eight years ago the Canadians insisted that the building was in poor condition and needed replacing. The MOD agreed and, earlier this year, contracts were awarded for a new range control building on a site a few hundred yards from the existing building, which, surprise, surprise, will be built by a Canadian construction company, using local labour. The cost to the United Kingdom, confirmed in a letter from the MOD, will be £4 million. Setting aside that we could build a decent-sized primary school for that amount, I question the need for a new building at all. As I said, I was at BATUS with colleagues a little more than a month ago, and the old one looked fine to me. The House need not accept the judgment of a humble Back-Bench MP, however, because I can assure the House that that view is shared by the permanent British military personnel in Canada, who categorically state that they do not need the new building. I urge Ministers to look again at that unnecessary project and to pull the plug immediately. Just think how many helicopter training hours we could fund with the £4 million saved.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I was on the same trip to BATUS and the training facilities there are second to none—they are an incredible facility for the British Army to use, and no one for one minute is doubting that. During our recent visit to BATUS as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, however, we saw another example of the ludicrous bias in the memorandum of understanding. The British Army has two personnel looking after several bunkers of live ammunition, whereas the Canadians have six personnel looking after the equivalent of a tableful of ammunition, 80% of whose cost is paid for by the British taxpayer. Does my hon. Friend agree that the BATUS memorandum of understanding needs to be looked at again now, for renegotiation, rather than being ignored? My understanding from the Minister is that there are no plans at all to renegotiate the MOU.

Gordon Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for reminding me of that additional scandal—which is what it is, ultimately—about an agreement that allows the Canadians to employ whomever they want with the British taxpayer paying up to 80%. I, too, urge Ministers to enter into immediate negotiations with the Canadian Government to reduce the percentage of the total operating costs of BATUS paid for by the British taxpayer. I hope they do so, and it can be done, because the memorandum of understanding is a rolling contract—there is no bar on opening negotiations at any time.

The MOD pays the Canadians £20 million a year to use the BATUS training area which is, as my hon. Friend said, a fantastic training facility, and I would certainly not want it to close. Entering into new negotiations with the Canadian Government might pose a threat because the Canadians could turn round and ask the British to leave, but I do not believe they would. It is Canada's interest as much as ours to have that joint training facility, and I remind Ministers that it is a joint training facility for which we Brits pay 80% of the cost. In addition to the £20 million that Britain pays for use of the training area, the UK pays a proportion of the operating costs, which is around £80 million a year, so the total cost of the facility is £100 million a year. In the current economic climate, with members of the armed forces being asked to accept cuts in pension entitlement and allowances, it is surely right that the MOD makes an effort to reduce the cost of operating BATUS.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I, too, was on the parliamentary scheme visit to Canada, and I could not decide whether the Canadian Government wanted the British Army at BATUS. Given what my hon. Friend has just said, would it be worth considering leaving Canada and using other areas such as Scotland and Germany? The Army of the Rhine has to return to the United Kingdom, and perhaps we could look at more cost-effective areas instead of staying in BATUS.

Gordon Henderson: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. While we were visiting BATUS, it became clear that with the number of oil wells in the 2,700 sq km of training area, which is essentially protected by the Canadian Government, there must be tremendous pressure on them from the oil companies to encourage the British Army to leave BATUS. That is a risk, as I pointed out, but my hon. Friend is right in suggesting that other options are open to the British Government, not only in Scotland and Germany, but perhaps with expansion of the training area in Kenya, which colleagues may visit in the new year.

My personal view is that nothing that we can provide in this country is suitable for armoured warfare and tank manoeuvres. That is a problem with Scotland, although it could provide good training facilities. Germany is an option, but Kenya would pose a risk because of what might happen if there were a change of regime to an unfriendly Government and we had to leave. At least Canada is a long-standing ally and, I hope, a long-standing future ally.

I do not want BATUS to leave Canada, but in the present economic climate the Canadian Government will recognise that the British Government must do something to reduce costs, and I ask the MOD to start those negotiations. If we could negotiate a more equitable 60:40 split, which would be a reasonable split for a shared facility, that would save British taxpayers at least £20 million a year, and probably more. A more equitable cost share would encourage the Canadians to be more cost conscious when considering whom they employ, how many people they employ, and how they operate. That should be considered.

Good negotiation is the key, and there is the rub. I simply have no faith that some other procurements negotiated by the MOD provide the best possible deal for British taxpayers or, perhaps more importantly, the armed forces personnel who must live with the consequences of those contracts.

Mr Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does he agree that the MOD's focus should be on value for money, rather than price? A contractor in my constituency, F.J. Bamkin, made high-quality socks for the MOD, but lost the contract to a company providing a much cheaper but inferior product. If the focus was on value for money, rather than just price, we might be more successful.

Gordon Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is right, and I will come to that when referring to a contractor in my constituency whose situation reflects, in a slightly different way, the difficulties facing suppliers. I hope that he will bear with me.

I have no faith in the MOD securing a good deal for taxpayers, and I will highlight as an example a couple of contracts, the negotiation of which can best be described as nonsensical. I recently visited the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment at its Tidworth camp in Hampshire. I toured the armoured vehicle repair shop and noticed that one of the lifting ramps was cordoned off. When I asked why, I was told that the ramp had been out of order for a couple of weeks, and that although the on-site mechanics could repair it, as would be expected from REME personnel, they were not allowed to because the contract for the equipment required outside contractors to be called in, and the regiment was having trouble getting those contractors in. The bureaucracy involved in applying for the contractors to do the work was not only taking up a lot of time, but was a lot of work. That is idiotic.

While at Tidworth, I saw another example of idiocy. The problem, which is only a small one, is in the sergeants' mess, but I have no reason to think that this is not replicated in all messes throughout the armed forces. The range of beers on offer is limited to brands determined by the private company that runs those messes, and if that is not bad enough for beer drinkers, the corporals are even worse off, because the contract does not recognise that corporals have a mess. It recognises only officers' messes and sergeants' messes. The corporals must pay almost double the price for beer as sergeants. In the grand scheme of things this is a small issue, but such small niggling issues chip away at the morale of our service personnel, yet they are so easy to resolve with the right contracts and the right negotiation.

I turn now to a specific procurement problem that affected a company in my constituency. The company wanted to bid for MOD work, but the tender document was drafted in such a way that compliance was impossible for any company except the existing supplier. The products that my constituents wanted met all the relevant quality and safety standards, and all the tender conditions except one. The tender document required proof of field trials carried out in Desert Storm warfare conditions. That condition could, of course, be met only by the company that supplied the equipment during that conflict. My constituent was not best pleased and, understandably, believes that the tender document was written not by the MOD, but by the supplier of the original equipment. I am slightly more charitable, and inclined to believe that the MOD staff who drafted the tender document simply did not consider the ramifications of what they were writing, and what the consequences would be.

I want to finish with a confession. I know something about MOD negotiators, because I worked for 15 years as a senior contracts officer for GEC Marconi Avionics.

[Gordon Henderson]

I spent my time running rings round MOD staff while negotiating various defence contracts. That is the problem and the solution all in one. The MOD needs people with a sound commercial background, the desire to get as good a deal for the taxpayer as they would if they were still working for a private company, and a financial incentive if they succeed.

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He has put his finger on the crux of the matter with his ability to run rings around procurement staff at the MOD. Is part of the problem the fact that procurement staff in the Ministry rotate, and would a more professional, stable procurement service go some way to solving the problems that he has outlined so eloquently?

Gordon Henderson: I welcome that intervention. My hon. Friend is right because that is half the problem. However, my experience of running rings around staff during negotiations does not apply only to MOD staff; I have also negotiated with staff from the Department of Defence in America and with Canadian defence staff and they are all the same. They are civil servants who have no interest or background in commercial matters. They are negotiating with taxpayers' money, which does not come out of their pockets or affect their profits. They have no incentive.

Karen Lumley (Redditch) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for sharing his vast experience. I know that the taxpayer needs value for money, but does my hon. Friend also accept that we need to use Great British companies, such as Mettis Aerospace in my constituency which employs over 500 people?

Gordon Henderson: I accept everything that my hon. Friend says. It is vital to bring more professionalism into procurement. I do not want this debate to be only about kicking the MOD. I suspect that procurement systems across Government are absolute rubbish, and today's debate highlights a deeply flawed system that we must try to do something about.

2.52 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sorry that I was not present at the start of the debate and I will be brief because other colleagues wish to speak. I want to introduce a wider issue of defence procurement and I hope that the Minister will respond to my contribution. The issue concerns the large amounts of money that are being spent in advance of a parliamentary decision on the replacement of Britain's nuclear weapon system. The Minister is smiling but I am not sure why—perhaps it is out of desperation at the amount of money flowing out of his Department and into the hands of contractors as we speak.

I would like the Minister to answer a number of questions about the costs of replacing our nuclear weapon system. The main gate decision on the Trident replacement is not due before the House until 2016. Out-turn prices were estimated in the initial gate report to be £25 billion for the replacement of the submarine, and costs for the successor system, including the warhead and infrastructure development, were between £30 billion and £32 billion. So far, £900 million has been spent on planning and replacement, and £3 billion is due to be spent on detailed design before 2016. The rest will be spent after the main gate decision in 2016.

A number of serious questions must be raised. This is not a discussion on foreign policy and we are not debating nuclear negotiations. Nevertheless, when we are faced with a massive deficit, and people in every community in the country are being told to make savings, why is the Ministry of Defence calmly ploughing ahead to get rid of £100 billion of public money on a nuclear missile system that many of us believe to be illegal, unnecessary and dangerous? All the money being spent is going into the pockets of various contractors around the world and not being put to any socially useful purpose.

Whatever choice is reached in 2016, major elements of the vessels will already have been ordered before Parliament has had a chance to debate the issue. That includes £380 million spent on the first submarine, £145 million on the second and £6 million on the third —those are the submarine costs alone. I hope that the MOD will be more open about what that expenditure is for and why it is necessary to make it ahead of any parliamentary decision. I was told by a Minister in another debate that such actions are the normal way of doing things in the Ministry of Defence, and that it does things on a sort of custom and practice basis. If it is custom and practice for the MOD to spend such sums of money without parliamentary approval, I suggest that that custom and practice needs to stop. There should be specific parliamentary approval for each element of expenditure, but that has not happened in this case.

Further spending is taking place at Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston and Burghfield, and the full cost of project Pegasus—the proposed new facility for manufacturing enriched uranium components for nuclear warheads and reactor fuel for nuclear-powered submarines—was priced at £747 million when it received initial approval in 2007. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed whether that figure is correct. If it is not, will he give the Chamber an accurate figure and state how much more money is expected to be spent on project Pegasus at AWE Aldermaston and Burghfield?

The relationship between the MOD and defence contractors is interesting. Poachers who join the side of the gamekeeper are obviously extraordinarily welcome, and the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) brought a particular expertise to the debate. He seemed, however, to underline an issue that needs questioning concerning the close relationship between the MOD, defence contractors and the defence industry, and the large amounts of money being spent. Parliament exists to control what the Government do. MPs exist to represent their constituents and hold the Executive to account, and there are serious questions about the decision-making process surrounding the replacement of Trident, the purpose of Trident, and the vast expenses that are being undertaken without any parliamentary approval.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this debate and I want to pick up the point about contracts and transparency in Government expenditure. The strategic defence and security review will lead to the renegotiation of many contracts, and that may lead to some savings or perhaps to an increase in costs. So far, the MOD has failed to provide the Public Accounts Committee, the parliamentary body that looks at value for money in defence spending—

Mr Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should not be speeches. I ask the hon. Gentleman to be brief.

Nick Smith: Thank you, Mr Hood. Does my hon. Friend agree that transparency is vital in cases such as that under discussion, so that Parliament can scrutinise expensive defence procurement issues?

Jeremy Corbyn: Absolutely. Parliament must scrutinise such expenditure. One of the greatest weaknesses of the British parliamentary system relates to its ability to scrutinise expenditure. We do not traditionally do line-by-line budget voting in this country, and although the Public Accounts Committee does a good job, it can look into only one theme or area of expenditure at a time. Perhaps we need tougher scrutiny, particularly where the Ministry of Defence is concerned and given the levels of expenditure being discussed.

I have two final points. Some colleagues present today represent constituencies that have embarked—or are likely to embark—on the manufacture and development of submarines and nuclear warheads, and some represent constituencies that have a big defence interest. I do not have a big defence interest in my constituency but I understand what the position of my colleagues may be. However, there are enormous skills in the defence industry in this country. We make planes, ships and all kinds of things very well, and we have a highly skilled work force. How much better would it be to have a longer-term trajectory for using those skills to make other things such as socially useful products that will develop, sustain and support people, rather than weapons of war or, in the case of nuclear weapons and submarines, weapons of mass destruction that can only kill large numbers of civilians?

Concerns have been raised that the cost of the Trident replacement programme puts significant stresses on the rest of the Ministry of Defence budget. I hear complaints from many people throughout the armed services that they are experiencing various shortages at present. All hon. Members in the Chamber will be able to relate to that. None of those shortages will be met while we continue with the massive expenditure on nuclear weapons and the preparation for replacing the submarines and missiles.

A document entitled "Looking into the Black Hole" by the Royal United Services Institute states:

> "The largest, and politically most difficult, procurement programme over the next two decades will be the construction of a successor to the Trident nuclear deterrent submarines. The MoD is due to spend £7 billion over the decade to 2020 on the initial concept, design and development phases of this project, equivalent to around 11 per cent of the new equipment budget over the decade from 2011/12 to 2020/21. But the bulk of spending on the successor submarines, total costs of which are projected at £25 billion, is due to occur during the decade after 2020/21. The Main Gate decision, which gives permission for the Demonstration and Manufacture phase to begin, is due to be made in 2016. If this schedule remains, spending on the successor programme will rise sharply, probably reaching a peak of around 30 per cent of the new equipment budget by 2021/22 or 2022/23, when the first-of-class begins production. It is likely to remain close to this level until after the planned delivery of the first submarine".

We are on a trajectory to spend a great deal of money before Parliament has even made the decision. I could write now the speech for the Secretary of State, whoever it will be, in 2016—"We've spent so much, done so much and made such preparations. Let's spend another £60 billion on this project." Why can we not have that debate, discussion and decision now, rather than leaving it for another five years, until 2016, when all this money will have been spent?

3.1 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I do not know whether you care to cast your mind back to May 1997, Mr Hood, but you drew the short straw of being the hon. Member who had to respond to my maiden speech. That speech was about nuclear weapons—Trident—and I fear that this one will be on the same subject. Indeed, I suspect that it will not be the last one that you or other hon. Members hear from me on the subject. I sometimes think that I should go into a sort of partnership with the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). We have debated this subject many times over the years. He never changes his tune, and I never change mine, but the debate remains live. It relates to procurement, in addition to strategy and the ethics or otherwise of nuclear deterrence, because of course the procurement process for Trident has been much disrupted.

The hon. Gentleman made great play of the fact that Parliament has not yet had the debate. Well, excuse me, I think that Parliament did have a debate. If I remember correctly, it was in the spring of 2007, and both the Labour party and the Conservative party were wholly in favour of the next generation of Trident being constructed. I recall the then Leader of the Opposition—now the Prime Minister—to whose speech I had contributed, passing me an Order Paper on which he had inscribed the words "Julian gets his way". Sadly, of course, there's many a slip between cup and lip or, indeed, between a vote in Parliament and the deployment of a successor generation. The slip concerned came in the failure of the Conservative party to win an overall majority at the last general election. That ought not to have been a problem for the procurement process for Trident, given that the Labour party had gone into the election pledged to renew the nuclear deterrent and so had the Conservative party. Only the Liberal Democrats were opposed to that.

Jeremy Corbyn: I know that the hon. Gentleman loves the fact that the Conservatives are in a coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats—it is what gets him out of bed every morning and into work—but in his discussions with his Liberal Democrat colleagues, has he reached any conclusion about whether they do or do not want a nuclear missile or whether they want a different type of nuclear missile in the review that apparently is being undertaken?

Dr Lewis: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman—I am tempted to say "my hon. Friend"—that the Liberal Democrats really differ from both of us, because he

[Dr Julian Lewis]

knows where he stands on nuclear weapons and I know where I stand, but the Liberal Democrats stand firmly with a foot in both camps. They know that they do not want Trident, but they do not want to put themselves in his camp by telling the truth, which is that the majority of their activists are one-sided nuclear disarmers and do not want a strategic nuclear deterrent at all. Therefore, they come up with this fiction that it is possible to have a viable strategic nuclear deterrent with an alternative system to Trident.

That ought to have made no headway at all when the coalition was formed. The reason for that was that I and all the other Conservative Members of Parliament, who were being addressed by the Prime Minister-to-be at a meeting in Committee Room 14, were told what the terms of the coalition agreement would be, or some of the basic outlines of the terms. We were told that we would have to accept certain things that the Liberal Democrats wanted that we did not want, such as a referendum on the alternative vote, but that the Liberals would have to accept things that we wanted that they did not want, such as the renewal of Trident—that was the very example chosen. I remember my friend and colleague the future Chancellor of the Exchequer looking up at that moment, catching my eye—because at the time I was still the party spokesman on the Royal Navy and the nuclear deterrent—and nodding vigorously in confirmation of what the leader of the party had said. You can imagine, Mr Hood, my surprise and dismay—

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the issue of discussions and debate, does the lesson of someone nodding vigorously in agreement with a position, only for that subsequently to be replaced by a cold, hard dose of reality, ring a bell in relation to other issues?

Dr Lewis: There is always the possibility that people will change their mind when they see different circumstances, but I genuinely feel that that has not applied in this case as a result of what I was about to explain and what hon. Members will remember. Out of the blue, even though the procurement of a replacement and successor system for Trident had specifically been excluded from the terms of the security and defence review, on the day when the statement was made, publishing the review and presenting it to Parliament, we were told that the main gate decision, the contracts for Trident would be put off until after the next election. With the greatest respect to the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), there was no doubt at all that that had nothing to do with hard facts or realities creeping in, and everything to do with politics, as the letter subsequently sent out from the president of the Liberal Democrats, crowing in triumph at the delay of the Trident decision, made clear.

I must not wander too far from the procurement emphasis of this debate. Therefore, I would like to put a specific question to my hon. Friend the Defence Minister with responsibility for procurement issues. It relates to the study that is being done about alternative systems to Trident as a possible nuclear deterrent. That is being done as a gift, a present, a political offering to the Liberal Democrats in the coalition, and I believe that the study is being carried out by the Cabinet Office rather than the Ministry of Defence, although the Ministry of Defence is supplying the material to the Cabinet Office.

I have to say to the Minister that any halfway competent assessment team, facing the problem of examining the existing and the potential systems for carrying a nuclear deterrent in the future, could do a comprehensive study over a period of probably not more than two or three months and arguably over a few weeks, on the basis of the accumulated knowledge of half a century that we have in the business of strategic nuclear deterrence. I would therefore like to know what progress such a study is making or whether it will in fact be spun out until the next general election. The reality is that there is no alternative to Trident for the next generation of the strategic nuclear deterrent, and I suspect that my political opponents in the CND ranks would agree.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): Just as an aside, does the hon. Gentleman have any concerns that the study was one of the documents put in the waste paper bin in the park?

Dr Lewis: I do not mind so much when unclassified documents are thrown away, but I do mind when this country's basic protection is thrown away. I really do not want to see another hung Parliament, with both major parties having gone into an election proclaiming their commitment to the next generation of the nuclear deterrent, only for a small third party that is adamantly opposed to that deterrent, but which does not have the guts to wear its unilateralism openly, to blackmail the leaders of those two parties in turn, saying, "You get rid of this weapons system and we will make you Prime Minister."

Stephen Gilbert: I feel loth to interrupt my hon. Friend as he expands on how a small but effective team can punch above its weight in the coalition, because he is doing a splendid job. Does he not see, however, that the threat facing the United Kingdom has changed hugely over the 20 or 30 years since the end of the cold war? Does he not agree, therefore, that it is right and proper to examine whether we need to change our plans in response to that changing environment?

Mr Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. We are now moving from a procurement debate into a pro-nuclear or anti-nuclear debate.

Dr Lewis: I shall briefly deal with the point, as it is out there, and then I shall move back to procurement in the narrow sense, if I may.

Mr Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. I would much prefer you to carry on with your very interesting speech.

Dr Lewis: Thank you very much. I would simply say that punching above one's weight and getting a result that reverses the mandate of the two large parties are very different things.

The question is what happens in the procurement process for a weapons system that Parliament has already voted in principle to bring into existence. The hon. Member for Islington North says Parliament should debate and vote on the issues again and again at every stage of the procurement process. As the Minister will confirm, however, procurement does not work that way; there are certain set stages in the procurement of a weapons system at which Parliament may have its say and at which contracts must be signed. The fact is that the contract in this case has been put off until after the election, and the result is that the entire procurement project has been put in jeopardy.

The systems we are worried about—whether nuclear systems or aircraft carriers—will be built over a fairly long period, but they will be in service over a very long period. The lifespan of the new super-carriers will be 50 years, and that of the next generation of the nuclear deterrent will be about 30 or 35 years. Therefore—I would not dream of returning to our earlier debate—the circumstances that have changed in the world over the past 15, 20 or 25 years might well change again over the next 15, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years. That is why we have armies, navies and air forces in times of peace, when there is no apparent threat on the horizon, and why we need systems such as the nuclear deterrent—to prevent us from being taken by surprise.

I must draw my remarks to a conclusion, as others will not have time to speak otherwise. However, I would not like today to pass without paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the former Secretary of State for Defence, and wishing him all the best. I served under him and three previous shadow Secretaries of State, and I know that defence specialists across the parties are bound by a common world view and a common realisation that decisions taken in the defence portfolio, above all others, will determine whether the people of this country remain safe and whether our forces, when they go into action, sustain great casualties or emerge triumphant, bearing few, if any, casualties. The responsibility for those issues is fearsome. My right hon. Friend had a passionate belief in the importance of the Anglo-American alliance and of procuring a future generation of the nuclear deterrent, and I trust that his successor will be equally committed.

Finally, I welcome the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck) to her responsibilities. Like many members of Labour defence teams in the past, she takes defence seriously and works on a non-partisan basis when she can.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should say that we may well be comfortable for time. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokesmen at 3.40 at the latest, and I have two hon. Members on my list of speakers.

3.16 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hood. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). My remarks will follow on neatly from his, as his did from those of my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—those who speak in debates on the deterrent are a kind of a parliamentary tag team. This is not the first time we have seen that, and I am sure that it will not be the last.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is an asymmetric triangle.

John Woodcock: Yes, that is quite possibly true, and I may say something about the fundamental importance of this debate for Opposition Members later.

I want to talk about the successor deterrent in the context of procurement and the critical issue of sovereign capability. Defence procurement is different from so much Government procurement in other Departments, because of the importance of Britain retaining capability in certain key strategic areas. Submarine capability must remain one of those, and British submarines defending British shores must continue to be built in Britain. It is a happy fact that the only place in Britain that can build them is in my constituency, and what an incredible engineering feat is achieved there.

It is important that procurement is undertaken in the most effective way. Gaps in construction could spell disaster for our capability to build submarines. Hon. Members will think back to the early 1990s, when the previous Conservative Government left a gap between finishing the Vanguard class submarines and starting the Astute class submarines. Ministers say—I welcome this, and we need to hold them to it—that they have learned from those mistakes and from the experience of how difficult it was to restart our capability in Barrow. In fact, the problems and cost overruns experienced with the new Astute class submarines came in large part from the fact that the people building them were learning their craft anew.

Given the constraints of sovereign capability and the fact that only one place in Britain will retain the skills to build submarines, it is critical that the Government do whatever it takes to ensure that the taxpayer gets value for money and that the country's security is upheld. Conservative Members were hot on that in opposition, when they repeatedly pointed out the cost to taxpayers of delaying important procurement projects and of shifting timetables to the right. It therefore greatly concerned me that when they took office, they delayed the proposed in-service date for the successor deterrent submarines from 2024 to 2028, which necessitated a re-baselining of the Astute class submarines at an increased per boat cost to taxpayers and created the need for a costly refit of the Vanguard class submarines. In an answer to me on 8 November 2010, at column 5, the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), put the cost between £1.2 billion and £1.4 billion, which is the cost of refuelling alone aside from any other cost incurred in keeping the submarines going.

Apart from the increased cost, the changed in-service date has potentially stretched the safe life of the current Vanguard class submarine to its limit. Experts in the Navy, Barrow shipyard and the Government say that with the increased cost of the refit they think they can keep the Vanguard class submarines in service for the projected time, but their life will be stretched to the limit, and any further delay could compromise safety and radically increase the cost. I hope that the Minister will comment on that. It is important that we keep the

[John Woodcock]

project to time, but it has slipped in the past, and if it slips further, given that he has increased the risk to the project, what will happen?

I hope that the Minister will make it clear whether the new Defence Secretary intends to look at the issue afresh, and, if so, what that is likely to entail. Will he ring-fence the budget for Trident from the defence main budget, which has already been mentioned in the debate? Will he make clear the overall extra cost to the taxpayer from the political deal between the coalition factions, which the hon. Member for New Forest East has expanded on at length? That deal subjugated what was in the best interest of British taxpayers on procurement and the defence of the realm to political expediency in this Parliament.

Nick Smith: I take my hon. Friend's point about timing, which is perfectly made, but the alteration to requirements is also important. In the strategic defence and security review the Government, as we have seen, changed their mind about what planes would travel on the new aircraft carrier, which has pumped up the cost by billions.

John Woodcock: My hon. Friend has extended my point. Because of the limitations that have necessarily been put on defence procurement for very good reasons, Ministers have an increased responsibility to make the right decisions. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson), whom I congratulate on obtaining the debate, expanded at length on other areas of difficulty, and I hope that the Minister will deal with those points, particularly the most important issue of all for our defence—the ultimate deterrent that the UK maintains.

3.24 pm

Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing the debate, which he promised would be wide-ranging, as it has certainly proved. I want to make passing reference to some of his points about the waste of public money in various previous defence procurement contracts, which is particularly galling given how hard we are now sweating our military assets, working people and equipment to deliver incredible value for money. It is galling, too, because, representing a military constituency, I receive letters from wives in military families saying, for example, that their husband is about to be deployed for a second eight-month term with only a 10-week break, and will be away for a second consecutive Christmas. That puts incredible pressure on families, so it seems very wrong to throw money away thoughtlessly on ill-devised and badly thought-out procurement contracts.

I want, however, to talk about another matter, and that is the vagaries of a defence procurement process which puts obstacles in the way of good, efficiently run British companies—particularly small or medium-sized enterprises—winning contracts, creating jobs and earning the money to help the country grow out of its economic hardship. I know that the Government have always recognised the strategic and economic importance of the defence sector. I have six significant defence companies based in my constituency, so I have become increasingly aware in the past 18 months of the challenges that the industry faces. In the light of the forthcoming White Paper on defence and security equipment, support and technology, I urge the Ministry of Defence to deal with three areas of concern to the companies in my constituency: support for SMEs, greater long-term planning and a strategy for successful outsourcing to industry.

I have spoken before in the Chamber about the great importance of SMEs in all sectors. They are truly the lifeblood of the defence industry. In my constituency, SMEs such as Vector Aerospace represent vital links in the supply chain that allow our headline companies to succeed, and to be world beaters. Britain boasts more SMEs in its defence industry than France, Germany, Spain and Italy combined, and we must recognise and nurture those unique assets.

I welcomed the acknowledgement in the December 2010 Green Paper that SMEs are a vital source of innovation and flexibility. I now urge the Government to address the enduring challenges that SMEs face, as unreliable or slow acquisition processes continue to place unmanageable burdens on their cash flows. Requirements such as the framework agreement for technical support listing have also been highlighted by small contractors in my constituency as prohibitive to SMEs supplying the Ministry of Defence.

The forthcoming White Paper must deliver comprehensive support, through the procurement processes and supply chain management, for our SMEs, so that they can continue to be the pride of the British defence industry. Across all tiers, our defence companies provide jobs for more than 300,000 people and add £12 billion to the UK economy, but, despite the importance of that, the Government are right to prioritise the needs of our armed forces and the taxpayer above industry. We must always be clear that we are not in the business of artificial job creation through public sector procurement. However, the companies whose representatives I have spoken to in my constituency and beyond are not demanding protectionism. They want, for the taxpayer and for industry, an environment that delivers the best value for Government and appropriate support for British companies.

Jeremy Corbyn: In the hon. Lady's dealings with local companies, which undoubtedly have very high skill levels, has there been any discussion or consideration of contracts outside defence, and in other areas, using those transferable skills?

Caroline Dinenage: Many do that, and many work in the defence of other countries outside the UK, but Vector Aerospace does repairs and servicing for many of the helicopters—Chinook, Sea King and Lynx—and the mainstay of its work is for the British military.

The White Paper must tackle two procurement challenges that have frequently hampered both industry and cost-cutting efforts. First, we must ensure that through-life capability management is fully considered in the procurement process. In many respects, the MOD is right to prioritise buying off-the-shelf products at the best value, but with acquisition representing only 15% to 20% of the lifetime cost of a programme, there can be significant cost implications to excessively short-term thinking. That has been all too apparent in the case of the Carson rotor blades purchased under an urgent operational requirement for helicopters in Afghanistan, which lacked a repair contract and so had to be ordered as new each time one broke. That is absurd and highly expensive, and we must seek to avoid that in future through greater scope in the procurement process for long-term thinking.

Secondly, the White Paper must ensure that the limited resources of the MOD are put to the best use through successful partnerships with industry. Representatives from Vector Aerospace, which I have already mentioned, have noted that the outsourcing of functions carried out by service personnel or civil servants can deliver significant savings to the taxpayer while continuing to support British industry. They have had incredible results by sending their own personnel to Afghanistan to service and repair Chinook helicopters. Their performance has always been described as exceptional.

We need to ensure that long-term thinking is built into our procurement process. I look with great anticipation to the publication of the forthcoming White Paper, and urge the Government to ensure that it sustains the strategic and economic importance of our defence industry through delivering a supportive and considered procurement environment.

3.31 pm

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Hood. This is my first opportunity to speak as shadow Minister since the Minister's warm welcome last week at Defence Question Time. Looking back through *Hansard*, it is a little surprising that this is the first Westminster Hall debate on procurement since the last election, with the exception of two half-hour debates. I therefore warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this debate. He certainly ranged widely, as promised, and highlighted the broad scope and reach of the Ministry of Defence in procurement. There are major challenges in balancing defence equipment needs while ensuring value for money and retaining the essential skills base to support sovereign capability.

I know that I am not the only MP in the Chamber who has a sizeable defence community in their constituency. Before the last election, my constituency was called Plymouth Devonport, which included Her Majesty's naval base at Devonport. Thanks to the Boundary Commission, it looks like it might be coming back at the next general election, but we shall see. For me and many hon. Members, providing the right equipment to our troops when they need it, so that they can carry out the work for which they have been trained to the best of their ability, is of upmost importance. A number of hon. Members in the Chamber and I have constituencies filled with military personnel and their families, and I often pick up concerns on the doorstep. I should say at this point that I am delighted to have 29 Commando back in Plymouth, safe and sound. It is right and proper to debate the issues here today.

I listened with interest to the speech made by the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey and particularly to his reference to the British Army training unit, Suffield, based in Alberta on the Canadian prairies. It is worth noting that the reason why the British Army started to use that training site was due to the loss of El Adem and Tobruk in Libya when a certain Colonel Gaddafi came to power. The hon. Gentleman's point about the need for bases in secure venues is absolutely right. Suffield was used briefly during world war two, and since 1972 it has been used as a British Army training base, initially on a 10-year lease. The agreement has been repeatedly renewed, which the hon. Gentleman touched on. I believe that a rolling programme of indefinite use is being offered. I note his comments and questions regarding that area. Other hon. Members also quite rightly challenged whether money was being best spent by the MOD on upgrading the premises there. I will listen with interest to the Minister's answers to those questions.

The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey also touched on morale and beer prices, and he raised a genuine concern about how new companies break into the MOD marketplace, to which I will come later in my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) flagged up some potential problems, such as the need to secure the skills agenda and the loss of historic capability in Barrow, which is a lesson that we cannot forget. He also spoke about the implications of delays for contracts and cost overruns that follow.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Stephen Gilbert), in supporting concerns about the rotation of staff in procurement, raised a challenging issue. That did not used to be the case, because officers used to be retained within certain specialties, and a number of senior and ex-members of the armed forces have spoken to me on exactly that issue in the past. I hope that the Minister will respond to that, because that area deserves consideration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) asked a series of serious questions about Trident replacement and whether it is needed. He has always campaigned on that issue with a great deal of commitment. Again, I want to hear what the Minister has to say about the time scale and transparency regarding Trident.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) raised the issues of contracts and transparency and of the cost of the over-specification of projects.

The hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) is on the flip side of the coin from my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North. He described, with benefit of his long-standing interest and knowledge in defence matters, some of the problems regarding procurement and politicians' role in muddying the waters, if I am to be gentle about what is going on in the coalition regarding Trident.

Dr Julian Lewis: Because there has been such candour on Government Benches about muddied waters, for the sake of clarity, will the hon. Lady take the opportunity to reaffirm her party's firm commitment that Trident should be renewed and replaced by the successor system?

Alison Seabeck: The hon. Gentleman and I both stood on manifesto pledges that said exactly that. I also thank him for his kind comments in welcoming me to my new role.

[Alison Seabeck]

I would like to look more generally to the future of defence procurement. It would be remiss of me not to thank my predecessor in this role, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher), for his work alongside that of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Mr Murphy) in taking forward Labour's review on defence procurement—not least in commissioning the report from Admiral Lord West, Bill Thomas from Hewlett Packard and Tony Roulstone from Rolls-Royce Nuclear. I thank them for their incredibly detailed and thought-provoking report, which builds on the work carried out under the previous Government by Bernard Gray, who has been brought in by this Government as the new Chief of Defence Matériel.

In response to questions last week, the Minister told me that he had read the report, although from our exchange last Monday, I think that there might be some differences in interpretation. However, I believe that we need, on the back of the report and Lord Levene's excellent work, to look at structural reforms and at how, despite repeated attempts by successive Governments, we have failed to tackle overpriced and overrun projects. The Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office have clear views and some pretty sharp criticism on that. The Gray report did not mince its words either when talking about overheating in the equipment programme and the inability of the system to flesh out the real cost of equipment at an early stage.

We need to have a defence procurement policy that works with an active industrial policy—one that promotes defence exports, an area in which we in Britain excel and should continue to do so. The hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr Spencer), who is no longer in his seat, pointed that out. While value for money is clearly important, so is the quality of the product supplied to our armed forces, and British products are among the best. More than 21% of the global market in the past five years was met by British production, and we are the largest exporter to the European Union. Also, there is evidence that competition in the export market leads to an enhanced drive for innovation and improvement in those companies, from which the MOD could benefit. The make or buy proposals in the report submitted to the shadow defence team—it is good reading—deserve some further consideration. We all agree that we need a sustainable defence industrial base that can continue to deliver in the long term. Will the Minister let us have his thoughts on the proposal in the Gray report for a 10-year rolling budget, which does not seem to have found full favour with the current Government?

The hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) was absolutely right to say that small and medium-sized enterprises need a degree of long-term certainty when it comes to supporting programmes, particularly bigger programmes. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington North rightly mentioned the need for diversification of industry. It is all to the good if companies can diversify and find other markets, but there are a number of firms, of which I have several in my constituency, that are incredibly specialised in what they do. They provide bespoke products for defence purposes and it is difficult for them to expand, change or move on from what they do.

I welcome the Minister's thoughts on all those issues. Will he tell us what sort of relationship he has with his colleagues in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and what the feelings are about the need to join up procurement policy, which is such an important element in all this?

Finally, is the Minister happy that, for future procurement policy, there is a clear enough delineation between the absolute sovereign capability and the deployment sovereign capability? Is that something that will be made clear in the expected White Paper? Given the ever-changing nature of conflict, the need for greater co-operation between nations, the drive to secure British business opportunities in this field and the economic challenges that we face, we need to ensure that Governments now and in the future have in place the best systems through which to deliver equipment that is designed to enable the front-line soldier to survive, operate and fight. We also need the best technology and back-up for our armed forces, so that they can deliver force wherever and whenever it is required. I look forward to the new White Paper, because there is a real opportunity to make a difference in this particular sphere of MOD procurement.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Peter Luff): I join the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Alison Seabeck) in welcoming you to the Chair, Mr Hood. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your excellent chairmanship. We have been on various defence expeditions together and have enjoyed them greatly, and it is good to be here today.

I agree with what the hon. Lady said about the paucity of defence debates, and of defence procurement debates in particular. I commented on that fact about two or three weeks ago in the Department, and since then there have been two Adjournment debates, so we sometimes get what we wish for. Let us hope that there are more such debates, because it is very good for hon. Members to discuss these issues.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this important debate, which, according to my script, relates to a number of interesting and pertinent issues. I will go further in saying that there is a bewildering range of interesting and pertinent issues that cover everything from the price of beer in messes to the nuclear deterrent. The underlying philosophy behind defence procurement is underneath all that. I may not be able to do justice to all the remarks that have been made during this debate, but I will do my best.

Reflecting on what my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) said in her contribution, I pay tribute to all those who serve in our armed forces. Their courage and bravery enable the Government to fulfil their first and primary duty of providing security for our country. That duty remains ever more challenging given the complex nature of the threats that we face in the 21st century. Although, procurement—or acquisition as it is called these days—is an important part of that, it is simply a means to the end of helping those brave men and women serve their country, as they are doing right now as we speak, in two theatres.

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) mentioned the strategic defence and security review, which sets out a coherent path to delivering adaptable and flexible armed forces. It is crucial that we put in place the right technologies, skills and industrial capability to deliver that outcome. I do not recognise his description of the lack of scrutiny of MOD contracts. If anything, we suffer from an excess of scrutiny. The Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office do an excellent job. We will soon have the next NAO report on major projects to consider, too.

Nick Smith: I made that remark because an NAO report mentioned the weakness of the Government's feedback on that particular topic.

Peter Luff: It does not feel like that from this side of the fence. I look forward to the conclusions of the PAC on the forthcoming NAO report.

I accept that we need to be clear about how we plan to acquire and support our equipment for the armed forces, which is a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport mentioned. The support costs are typically about two thirds of the total acquisition cost, with one third being the initial acquisition. We also need to be clear about how we invest in technology to sustain the skills of the defence industry, which is something that the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) raised. That was about the only thing that I agreed with in his speech.

The scale of what we spend is huge; the total spend for the whole range of procurements in the financial year 2009-10 was £20.6 billion. It is right that hon. Members should be concerned about how we spend that money. It is also right that we should say that much of that is spent very well, very wisely and very effectively by skilled and talented people. It is inevitable that we concentrate on the problems, because that is the nature of Parliament and holding the Government to account is what we do. None the less, I pay tribute to all those who do their jobs remarkably well, whether they are in the armed services, the civil service, the MOD Abbey Wood or the organisation Defence Equipment and Support. They all do a great job serving our nation.

It is true that we face some difficult decisions. I will not score any partisan points by talking about our economic inheritance, and especially the inheritance for Defence Ministers, from the previous Government. In a characteristically thoughtful and articulate speech, my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) spoke about the need for fixed points in programmes for decisions. As he said, such a measure is important given the long period over which such decisions are felt. As I am frequently reminded, the last captain of the aircraft carriers that we are currently building is probably not even born yet, which puts into context the length of time we have.

I think that I can give the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View the assurance that she sought about the 10-year equipment programme. As I understand it, we now have a groundbreaking deal with the Treasury, which enables us to plan with much greater certainty the future of defence equipment and support in general.

I also want to pick up something that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East said about the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). The MOD is now set on a path of real recovery, real hope and real confidence thanks to his excellent work. It now falls to the ministerial team to continue that work as a tribute to his sterling leadership as Secretary of State.

I will concentrate my remarks on the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, because I owe him that courtesy. If I cannot deal with everyone else's comments, I apologise and will write to them. I will not comment on individual cases, but I reassure my hon. Friend that the support that we give to SMEs has a high priority in my portfolio. I pay tribute to Vector Aerospace, which is one of the few companies that have been named in this debate. It is an outstanding example of a medium-sized company.

We are making a few changes that should help the SMEs considerably. We are reducing the threshold at which the MOD advertises contract opportunities and have created the new defence suppliers forum, which meets regularly under my chairmanship, to discuss how SMEs can make a better contribution to defence and how we can help them achieve that. We are learning a lot from that group's work. We are launching a new Government-wide contracts finder that offers a free-to-access one-stop shop of public sector opportunities over £10,000. There will be more in the White Paper, the publication of which I too look forward to very much indeed. I cannot say too much about its contents but it will include a definition of value for money—something that many Members have mentioned—and talk more about outsourcing. Although there is already extensive outsourcing in defence—more extensive that many people realise—I agree that there is scope for more. The White Paper will also address the framework agreement on technical services and through-life costing, which is essential.

I am happy to reassure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View that our relationship with BIS is excellent and that there is nothing between us. I know that she would expect me to say that, but it happens to be true as well.

The White Paper will also define sovereignty requirements. I do not foresee any change in the definition that was published in the Green Paper last year.

I will now specifically address the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. I note that he worked for GEC Marconi, where he apparently ran rings around our officials. That issue is why Bernard Gray is working at present on the new matériel strategy. One of the principal purposes of that strategy is to ensure that we have the skills in place in Defence Equipment and Support to make sure that these procurement decisions are taken well and that the contracts are well negotiated. My hon. Friend has made a powerful point, and that work is ongoing. I hope that submissions to Ministers will come before the end of the year. And watch this space, because I agree that it is important that we do procurement and acquisition well, which has not always been the case. In the spirit of consensus, I think that the Opposition's document on acquisition is not at all bad. In my view, all it lacked was an apology, but that is another matter for another day.

Turning to Canada, I am pleased that my hon. Friend and other hon. Members obviously had such an interesting visit to the British Army training unit Suffield—BATUS—over the summer with the armed forces parliamentary

[Peter Luff]

scheme. That is a great scheme, which works very well under Sir Neil Thorne's excellent leadership. I have benefited from it twice with the Royal Navy—I am a "postgraduate" according to the scheme's definitions. Today has shown how valuable the scheme is in enabling Members to speak with authority about the armed services and to challenge Ministers on things that they find. It is what the scheme is there for, and we need to make even better use of it than we do already.

I slightly disagree with my hon. Friend's emphasis and what I think was the spirit of his remarks when it comes to Canada. Led by my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Her Majesty's Government are looking to develop even closer ties with Canada, as well as with other Commonwealth countries. A joint declaration of closer working between the UK and Canada has been drawn up by the FCO for signature by the two Prime Ministers, with a desire to seek

> "greater interoperability between our defence forces and deepen co-operation on procurement and capabilities, to be enabled in part by a Memorandum of Understanding - MoU - on Defence Materiel Cooperation",

and so on and so on and so on. The document was signed on 22 September by the two Prime Ministers, and it symbolises the very close relationship that we enjoy with the Canadians.

I will now talk about BATUS in more detail. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey reminded us, it was set up in Canada in 1972. The location was chosen for its ability to provide the large-scale manoeuvre exercises that at the time—the middle of the cold war—were seen as being critical to meeting the UK's operational and tactical requirements. BATUS provides 2,690 sq km of rolling, semi-arid prairie, delivering training on a scale that is unparalleled by anything available in the UK and enabling more than 11,000 troops to be trained each year. I want to place on record our real gratitude to the Canadians, who have been our utterly reliable allies in providing this world-class training location since 1972, which allows us to train in a way that is just not possible in the UK. The training at BATUS has been essential for the preparation of our troops for operational deployments, and we owe the Canadians a great debt for the part that they have played in enabling the training to happen.

Alison Seabeck: I want to ask the Minister a simple question: do BATUS and the recent new agreement give scope for any increased use of BATUS, as the German side starts to scale back?

Peter Luff: The hon. Lady not unexpectedly anticipates remarks that I will make in a few moments. I will turn to that issue then, if I may.

I will now address the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey about the costs involved with BATUS. The BATIC—British Armed Forces' Training in Canada—agreement makes clear provision for the cost-sharing of goods and services relating to UK training in Canada, including the provision of all goods, services and facilities supplied in Canada or procured through Canadian sources. The costs are shared in accordance with agreed formulae, which my hon. Friend talked about in his speech, and those arrangements are scrutinised carefully. In addition, the memorandum of understanding is open-ended and may be renegotiated—that will give my hon. Friend some encouragement—at any time with the mutual consent of both parties.

In my view, the UK quite rightly pays the lion's share of the costs of BATUS, on the basis that we use the facility significantly more than the Canadians. That is absolutely right and proper, and I have no problem with the cost-share involved in these arrangements. I agree that there is always scope to reduce costs, but other locations, as suggested by some hon. Members during this debate, are simply not equivalent and they would incur costs of their own, including significant set-up costs. So I am sure that the scope for savings is always there, but it may be more limited than my hon. Friend imagines.

Gordon Henderson: I accept what my hon. Friend says about the useful nature of BATUS. Nevertheless, does he not accept that it is wrong for the British taxpayer to have to pay such a high proportion of the costs without the MOD having a greater say in how those costs are accrued?

Peter Luff: I will look at some of the specific points that my hon. Friend made during his remarks, but I must say that I am broadly content with the overall structure of this arrangement, which delivers great value to British taxpayers and great opportunities for British armed forces, while strengthening and deepening our relationship with an important ally.

I must also say specifically that there has been no cancellation of helicopter training in BATUS. It is true that there are some different arrangements with contractors, including changes to some of the transport arrangements, but the training facilities involving helicopters have not been affected in any way. It is very important that that is understood.

Gordon Henderson: I am not sure whether we MPs were misled during our visit to BATUS, or whether the information has not yet filtered back to London, but I assure the Minister that there are two aspects of helicopter use during battleground operations: one is the use of helicopters to help injured people during the exercise, which is still being maintained and which involves BATUS using Canadian pilots; the other aspect, which has been cancelled, is the training that allows helicopters to be used to take troops into battle, as they would be used during a real battle operation. That second part of the training is the part that has been cancelled.

Peter Luff: I will clarify exactly what the arrangements are in a letter to my hon. Friend, so that there is no misunderstanding at all, but my information is that no aspect of our training arrangements has been affected by the new arrangements for helicopters.

Turning to the range control building at BATUS, it is true that there is an existing building, which provides the safety and co-ordination function required. It controls access and oversees safe practice on the range area, which is extremely important where live ammunition and weapons are concerned. Of course, it also controls movement around the prairie during live firing. In 2003, the Canadian Government approached the MOD with a number of infrastructure requirements that they felt needed to be addressed to enable the future use of the BATUS facility, including improvements to the range control building. I agree that the decision to upgrade that facility may not have been the UK's first priority, but the facility was in very poor condition and met neither UK nor Canadian building regulations. A number of options were considered and the only viable option was to construct a new building. The contract for that was awarded in February this year, so I am afraid that the possibility of cancellation is no longer one that we can countenance.

I promised the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View that I would talk about future training in BATUS, which relates to what other colleagues have said. I will simply say that BATUS is 2,690 sq km compared with Salisbury plain's 375 sq km, so BATUS is about eight or nine times the size of Salisbury plain. We must assess BATUS in the context of our overall training requirement, both in terms of the capacity and the nature of environments in which we need to train. We must also ensure that we end up with an overall solution that is the most cost-effective mix.

There is more work to be done before we can draw any conclusions, but what is certain for BATUS, any other training area and indeed for defence as a whole is that we need to drive out any unnecessary cost and to prioritise ruthlessly between what is "essential" as opposed to what is "highly desirable" or just "desirable". I know that our Canadian partners will support us, so any work that looks at BATUS will be a truly collaborative effort. Not only does the memorandum of understanding require that collaboration, but Canada is one of our closest and most valued allies, and our interests are closely aligned. So, to answer the hon. Lady's question, work is being done in this area.

I will briefly address the tank-lifting ramps at Tidworth. In view of the time that I have left to speak, I will not give my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey all the remarks that I have here. It is true that the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers could fix the ramps; it is also true that there are some issues around the contract; and I will look at that matter and write to him about it, because he has a point. I assure him that there has been absolutely no impact on operational capability. It is an important point, but he need not be concerned about the preparation of our armed forces or the health and safety of personnel using the site.

I now turn to the very important issue that my hon. Friend raised, which is drink—beer. The three-mess system is very much at the heart of the military ethos. Junior ranks' messes are private sector enterprises, because all bar stocks are purchased by the contractor and the messes are wholly commercial ventures. In the officers' messes and senior non-commissioned officers' messes, bar stock is purchased by the mess and paid for through mess members' subscriptions. Any profit is returned directly to the mess and lower prices can be set. I agree that there is a distinction there, but I am told that the three-mess system goes to the heart of military traditions and ethos. It is not a matter of contract—it is a matter of armed forces' choice—and this politician is not going to interfere in the traditions of the armed services. However, I have been assured that military front-line commands keep this matter under constant review, so I understand my hon. Friend's concern.

In the minute that I have left, I will address nuclear missile systems. I smiled when the hon. Member for Islington North got to his feet, because I could see the other "usual suspects" in Westminster Hall and I knew what would happen. Actually, I think that the hon. Gentleman's concerns have largely been addressed. The long-lead items for HMS Victory were bought 15 years ahead of the construction of the ship, and the oak for the ship was laid down accordingly. Long-lead items are an established part of military procurement, and they always will be. I do not think we need to make any apology for that.

I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East said, and he is right to keep us to our pledge. I assure him that the main gate decision being delayed until 2016 brings certain advantages, in that there will be a more mature design by then for us to approve. However, I hope he will hold us to the fire on an important capability that guarantees our freedom, as he so rightly reminded the Chamber. I also heard what the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said. He and I have often talked about this issue, and I will correspond with him about some of the specific points that he made.

Finally, as for the aircraft carriers, it is true that we are getting a more capable and stable carrier variant than the previous Government decided to have, and it is also true that that has a cost. However, at least we are buying increased capability for an additional sum, because the previous Government delayed the carriers for a year, which cost £1.6 billion, and just got them a year late.

Rural Broadband (Cheshire East)

4 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I will first speak about the need for rural broadband, particularly of the superfast variety, in Cheshire East. I will then go on to describe the benefits it will provide for that area and the wider region, to talk about the gaps in coverage and funding, and to ask for reassurances and a response from the Minister.

Cheshire East council considers that investment in superfast broadband is the single greatest action that can be taken to drive economic growth and improve the quality of life of residents. The area served by the council includes my constituency of Congleton and those of Macclesfield and of Crewe and Nantwich, and I am grateful to the Members who represent those constituencies for being here today, and also to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), to whom I will refer later.

The local enterprise partnership has designated the roll-out of superfast broadband across the area, and across the wider area of Cheshire West and Warrington, as its top priority. The Cheshire and Warrington superfast broadband partnership has been established by three local authorities—Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, and Warrington—which, working together, aim to achieve 100% superfast broadband coverage by 2015. To maximise the economic, social and environmental benefits for businesses and residents right across the region, that aspiration exceeds Broadband Delivery UK's 90% target. Much of what I say today will be in support of the work of that partnership, and I shall highlight the needs of constituents in Cheshire East.

The economic growth that the area needs, particularly to provide jobs for the next generation, will largely be driven by small businesses, and in my constituency it will be almost entirely so, because almost all its 4,000 or so businesses are small. They need the high speeds that superfast broadband provides to be able to compete nationally and globally with their more urban competitors that already have the service. Superfast broadband will enable them to offer existing services at lower costs, expand their market reach, increase productivity, develop new products and provide new services. The area needs high-speed broadband not only to ensure that existing businesses develop but also to attract new ones, but the benefits would not be for just businesses. I heard recently of a business man who was considering relocating to the area but was deterred by his school-student son, who said that he did not want to move because of the poor broadband connections.

It is not just the young who want high broadband speeds; the elderly, and the public and voluntary sectors that serve them, recognise the transformational social impact that comprehensive superfast broadband can bring, through technology that supports health care delivery. This includes telehealth, which is the remote capture of information for clinical review, telecare, which is a range of alarms and sensors in the home to enable independent living, and medical consultations through video teleconsultation. In the Cheshire East area, with its considerably higher than average ageing population, the benefits would be substantial. An excellent example, which demonstrates how the council is keen to capitalise on the use of technology to benefit older people, is the recently developed DemenShare scheme. This is a web-based scheme through which dementia sufferers and their carers can access and share support and know-how.

The need for superfast broadband in rural areas is well documented, and Cheshire East has a higher level of rurality than one might realise.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I am pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this important debate, and I welcome much of what I have heard about the introduction of high-speed broadband in Cheshire East. However, the benefit will be spread much wider than the residents of Cheshire because many of my constituents receive their broadband and their telephone line through the Congleton exchange.

Fiona Bruce: That is a point well made. Staffordshire Moorlands is a highly rural area, and it will benefit exponentially from the support.

Cheshire East is 64.4% rural. Rural areas can benefit disproportionately from investment in superfast broadband, and they are there to be benefited. The growth rate in VAT-registered businesses in rural areas is 2.7%, compared with a decline of 0.3% in England and Wales as a whole. Home-based businesses are becoming increasingly important in rural economies. An academic study by Mason and others reported that 50% of businesses in rural areas are home based, compared with 26% in urban areas. In a more local study—of Alsager, in my constituency—of which I was advised by the Alsager partnership, it was calculated that approximately one in 10 homes hosts some form of home-business working.

Bearing in mind the historically low levels of state-funded investment in recent years in many rural areas—including in my constituency and in Cheshire East as a whole—compared with their urban counterparts, there is significant potential to add economic value through superfast broadband investment. England's rural areas host at least 27% of the country's enterprises but only 9% of its business revenue. There is genuine potential, and superfast broadband is the platform for unleashing it in Cheshire East.

Turning to the benefits that superfast broadband coverage will provide, I have already touched upon those for the rural economy and for older people. In addition, exponential benefits can be gained in this region as a result of the already-skilled entrepreneurial population. The area is home to a high proportion of knowledge-based industries. In my constituency, there is already a significant presence of digital and creative industries, with a potential for great growth that could be magnified by the benefits of comprehensive superfast broadband coverage. Lying as it does just beyond the main commuter belts of Manchester and Liverpool, the high-level digital connectivity to new business provided from MediaCityUK in Salford has a particular potential to provide transformational impact, both in strengthening existing businesses and in promoting the area as a business location of regional significance. For example, a graphic designer who is able to download large files quickly could work efficiently mainly from home in Cheshire East, with occasional face-to-face meetings in MediaCityUK.

Turning to the educational benefits for our young people, educational attainment is higher than average in Cheshire East, and that is important because young people are likely to adopt superfast broadband and play an important role in using it to create and distribute content. In a constituency from which a disproportionate number of young people have migrated in recent decades to find work, it is particularly important for the intergenerational balance of our communities that we provide work for, and retain, young people within the area, and superfast broadband will be a key factor in ensuring that. In other words, the social and economic returns to the region—and, in turn, the support for the national economy—from investment in superfast broadband through a combination of private and Government funding will, I am assured, be disproportionately greater in the Cheshire and Warrington area than in many other regions.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. It is fair to say that some of the issues she has raised and the opportunities she has identified are similar across the border in north Wales. Does she agree that in rural areas an industry that would benefit greatly from increased access to fast broadband is the traditional agricultural community? In view of all the paperwork and forms that have to be completed online these days, that community needs superfast broadband.

Fiona Bruce: I agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. When I speak of the rural economy, I speak on behalf of the farming community in my constituency.

What current gaps in coverage and funding do Cheshire East and the wider Cheshire and Warrington sub-region seek to cover through the superfast broadband initiative? At present, 67% of the population of Cheshire East is covered, a figure provided by Ofcom in August 2011. That figure will increase to 86% by next year through private investment, mainly from BT, leaving a 14% gap representing 50,932 Cheshire East residents. The funding allocation for the area from Broadband Delivery UK will bring the figure up to 90%, but there are complications with the date and procedure for releasing that funding. I will return to that issue later.

The Cheshire and Warrington superfast broadband partnership is also seeking funding from the European regional development fund, but ERDF allocations will not be finalised until March 2012. Meanwhile, the BDUK approval framework will not be concluded until May 2012, leaving a disconnect between the two sets of funding, which are effectively interdependent. I am grateful to the Minister for having met me and representatives from Cheshire East some weeks ago to discuss the issue. I will appreciate his comments today, after his agreement to look into it. Underwriting such funds could be a considerable stretch for local authorities in these constrained economic times.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and recognise some of the concerns that she is discussing, particularly broadband access in communities such as Rainow—which I think she will mention in a minute—those in the peak district such as Wincle and Wildboarclough, and Flash in Staffordshire Moorlands. Is it not important for Government to signpost further and give local authorities such as Cheshire East greater support in securing access to those funds? It is not clear how to secure them quickly and in a co-ordinated way.

Fiona Bruce: I agree entirely that the picture is confused and detailed. As I will mention later, it is also split among Departments.

The total funding needed to achieve our aspiration of 100% broadband coverage across the Cheshire and Warrington area by 2015 is £40 million. Although we welcome the BDUK funding support, we recognise that under current plans, it will increase coverage only to 90%. The rural areas to which my colleagues have referred will be among that 10%.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on leading the charge in this debate and on this subject. During her remarks, I think I have heard the word "rural" two dozen times. Does she accept, however, that it is also an urban issue? In parts of Warrington, urban development has massively outstripped broadband infrastructure capability, and the need there is as great as in some of the rural areas mentioned by her and others.

Fiona Bruce: I agree entirely. Chapelford, which I know well from my time as a Warrington councillor, is one such area. One cause of difficulties is that although approximately 85% of telephone exchanges can be upgraded, about 15% of telephone cabinets are deemed by the private sector to be uneconomic or unfeasible to upgrade. BDUK financial support will not necessarily include those, either. Will the Minister comment on how they will be provided for, particularly in the areas to which we have referred?

In some areas, broadband coverage appears on paper to be provided, but the area contains white spots. Timbersbrook in my constituency is a good example—it has no adequate coverage at all—as is the Congleton business park. In the neighbouring constituency, the village of Rainow, only a couple of miles outside Macclesfield, is similarly affected. I heard a councillor for the area say only this week that it is faster to post a letter than to use the internet there.

Mr Edward Timpson (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I join the chorus in congratulating my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which is timely given the efforts being made in Cheshire East to introduce superfast broadband across the county. Will she add to that list some areas in my constituency? Businesses have contacted me that are already operational and want to expand, but are frustrated by extremely poor telecommunications infrastructure. If we are to attract new businesses to our county as well as keeping existing ones, we must ensure that we can provide them with that secure future.

Fiona Bruce: Absolutely. If we in the county of Cheshire are to achieve our aspiration to compete with the northern cities, we need that infrastructure in place for our businesses.

Funding is available from the European regional development fund—£43 million has been allocated to the north-west region as a whole—and Cheshire and Warrington will bid for £15 million to add to the £3.24 million in BDUK funding and the £430,000 secured from the rural development agency. It is hoped that the balance of the required money will be matched by the private sector. However, the £15 million bid to the ERDF is aspirational. We believe that Cheshire and Warrington have a strong case for the additional economic

[Fiona Bruce]

and social benefits that investment from the fund would secure for the local, regional and national economies, and a strong case within the north-west for securing that sum.

I am aware that there are other bidders to the ERDF funds for the north-west allocation for superfast broadband. Any comments or suggestions from the Minister on how funding towards superfast broadband in Cheshire East and the wider region might be secured from alternative sources, should our £15 million bid not be successful, would be appreciated. Will he also confirm whether today's announcement from Europe of a further £8 billion in superfast broadband funding is new money? If so, how can our aspiration, and those of other areas of the UK, to attract money from that funding provision be improved?

I seek further support from the Minister on streamlining the time frame for the BDUK and ERDF funds. Also, as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) mentioned, interdepartmental help could be provided to streamline the complex application process for local authorities.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I am grateful to her for mentioning my home town of Rainow. I wonder whether she can do something about the mobile phone signal, which is also weak. Earlier, she mentioned young people leaving Cheshire, Congleton and so on. Young people need places to live, and there is a shortage of affordable homes for newly-weds and young people. Does she agree that any future planning permissions should include good broadband provision as a condition?

Fiona Bruce: I agree entirely. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; his constituency is part of the Cheshire and Warrington partnership area.

At present, various Departments are involved in funding streams. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport—we are grateful for the Minister's presence here—is responsible for the BDUK allocations, while European funding for broadband lies within the remit of the Department for Communities and Local Government, and rural development funding is under the control of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In summary, Government support, which is much appreciated and clearly demonstrates the importance the Government place on this issue, is found across Departments. Any help the Minister can give to ensure that funding streams, time scales and application procedures are harmonised would be appreciated.

While I am discussing Government support, I commend the Government's work on digital inclusion through the website Race Online 2012, which is dedicated to promoting digital inclusion among older people. I ask that similar thought be given to promoting small businesses' use and maximisation of the benefits of technology, particularly superfast broadband, perhaps through a national business-focused campaign similar to Race Online 2012. It would encourage a groundswell of interest from businesses, which could in turn encourage much-needed additional private sector investment.

In conclusion, it is projected that a superfast broadband-enabled Cheshire and Warrington could add up to £197 million of growth annually to the region, create 5,500 jobs in the area over the next 10 years, and provide innumerable valuable social and economic benefits to the whole connected community.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (Mr Edward Vaizey): I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hood. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this debate. She and I have already met executives from Cheshire East council to discuss the issue. I also know from her own personal history that, before entering the House, she did some extraordinary work in her local community, which she continues to represent forcefully now that she is in Parliament. There could not be a stronger champion than her for broadband in her part of the world. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Macclesfield (David Rutley), for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), for Crewe and Nantwich (Mr Timpson), for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), for Warrington South (David Mowat) and for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) for their interventions, which show the astonishing amount of engagement and interest from colleagues in this important issue.

I want to use the brief time remaining to outline the progress that we have made in bringing greater broadband access to rural areas, and to try to answer some of the specific points that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has made. It is the coalition Government's aim to have the best superfast broadband network in Europe by the end of this Parliament, with 90% of households having access to superfast broadband, and universal broadband access of at least 2 megabits. It is an ambitious programme, but we have secured more than half a billion pounds to ensure that it happens.

As my hon. Friend has said, in her constituency some 14% of premises are unable to receive a good level of broadband, even after the private sector investment that is already taking place in the area. One in five people live in a rural community, and rural communities are home to more than 1 million businesses, so this is not just a "nice to have"—getting broadband out to rural areas is essential to our economic growth, as my hon. Friend has made clear. Reliable broadband also underpins the social fabric of our rural communities.

We published our plans for superfast broadband in detail at the end of last year. Through Broadband Delivery UK, the Government are working with local authorities and the devolved Administrations to ensure the delivery of broadband infrastructure to those areas that the market will not reach on its own. We have announced indicative funding allocations for every local authority area in England. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, £3.2 million has been set aside for Cheshire and Warrington. If that can be matched with local funding, we believe that that will make it possible to bring superfast broadband to 90% of properties, and standard broadband to all premises.

We are not dictating to each local authority how it should go about installing broadband in its area. It has been our view from the very beginning that local communities and, therefore, local authorities are best placed to determine their own priorities. Every local authority has therefore been asked to produce local broadband plans for each area that set out its approach, how it will deliver the economic benefits from broadband, and how it will ensure local match funding. Many local authorities throughout the country have made clear, detailed and imaginative proposals, and I am confident that this is the right approach.

As my hon. Friend has indicated, I was able to find out about the good progress being made on Cheshire's plans when I met her and officials from Cheshire East council recently. In my view, the Cheshire local broadband plan is well on the way to being ready, and my officials in BDUK are working closely with council officials on it.

I realise that match funding, particularly money from the European regional development fund, to which my hon. Friend has referred, is key to Cheshire's broadband future, as well as that of many other parts of the country. We have vigorously pursued the issue with colleagues in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Communities and Local Government, to try to ensure that broadband can be funded from the north-west region's programme, and likewise in other regions. We need to ensure that expenditure on broadband is consistent with the ERDF regulations. We recognise the critical nature of this funding to Cheshire and, indeed, others, and I want to make sure that we give as much scope as we can to allow funding for broadband projects.

I will briefly indicate the nature of the problem. Given that ERDF funds exist to promote economic growth and are, therefore, targeted at small and medium-sized enterprises, it has been a task to try to get some flexibility in the programmes. As my hon. Friend has made clear, a pipe going into a domestic home that houses a graphic designer will clearly promote economic growth, but, under current ERDF regulations, that would not be seen as funding to support economic growth, because it would not be going directly to business premises. We have, however, secured a revised definition of the final mile with DCLG, which should allow ERDF funds to be applied. The issue is with DCLG at the moment, and it is important that we work with it to communicate the revision to local offices of DCLG around the country. The issue was raised at the ministerial group on growth, and there was agreement that DCLG needs to address the issue. We continue to work with it on it.

We are also awaiting decisions from the cabinets of Cheshire councils to underwrite the ERDF funding, in lieu of a decision on ERDF to speed up so that we can speed up project approval of the local broadband plan. I would be happy to write in further detail to my hon. Friend on that progress, and to the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), to impress on him the need for clarity from my hon. Friend's point of view.

The procurement process has been mentioned. There are 40 local broadband projects across the country. We have worked with BDUK to put a framework contract in place to speed up the procurement process and to help local authorities minimise the costs and time taken for procurement. We also have to be mindful of physical limitations. Clearly, we cannot network the entire country at once and it will be important, as I think my hon. Friend has indicated, to ensure that we progress projects in a timely manner, to ensure that the operators who win contracts have the resources to implement them.

We are making a number of other key policy interventions. We will publish a second consultation on the deployment of new overhead lines, which should allow the deployment of broadband much more cheaply. Next month, we will issue guidance on microtrenching and street works. I also impress on my hon. Friends how important it is for them to work with local councils to ensure that the planning process is as simple and as low-cost as possible for operators when they are laying new fibre.

Finally, we have commissioned a review of the electronic communication code and how it applies to wayleaves and access to private land. I recently wrote to the Country Land and Business Association and the National Farmers Union to ask them to speed up the voluntary agreement at which they are meant to arrive to ensure that wayleaves can be dealt with. We have also made significant progress in reducing the cost of access to BT's ducts and poles. At the Conservative party conference, the Chancellor announced an additional £150 million for mobile coverage.

I hear what my hon. Friend says about responsibility being parcelled among a number of Departments, and I agree with the implications of her remarks, namely that the responsibility should be mine. I hope that she will lobby the Prime Minister on that later tonight.

S4C

4.29 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss a pressing question in Wales. This debate about S4C—I usually pronounce it "Ess pedwar eck" and if I slip in to saying it like that, I hope hon. Members will forgive me as I will be speaking my first language—could scarcely be more timely.

I have an interest in this matter because part of the Welsh TV industry is located in my constituency. I sometimes tell people much to their surprise that the main industries in my area are agriculture, tourism and TV. Those areas hardly sit together, but there we are. I therefore have a particular interest in the matter. A properly resourced, managed and directed S4C is absolutely essential for the continuing renaissance of the Welsh language. It is vital to secure the plurality of the television provision in Wales because it is crucial for the Welsh television industry both in English and Welsh. Clearly, there is a relationship and an exchange of ideas and staff—they are co-dependent.

It is often left out of the debate that it is essential we have a properly managed, directed and resourced S4C for the future of the workers in the industry. Over the years—in fact, decades—workers in the television industry have lost their jobs and been moved. The unions have complained, studios have been closed and so on. Those people have a proper interest in the matter as well.

A moment ago, I said there had been a renaissance in the Welsh language. Welsh language television has played a significant part in that. Some years ago, I remember speaking at a conference on language planning in Dublin and explaining the utility of having children's programmes, rock and roll music, drama and soap operas in Welsh and how that was adding to the growth of the language. A voice at the back said, "Are you seriously telling the conference that the renaissance in the Welsh language is all to do with having pop music in Welsh?" Well, that is clearly not the case. There has been movement from this Government, the previous Government and, significantly, the Government in Wales over the legislative status of the Welsh language. Significantly, the Welsh Language Act 1993, which was passed by the preceding Conservative Government, was a huge step forward and I am glad to pay tribute to all those people who were involved with that.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the growth of the language—the holistic approach operated by successive Assembly Governments—has necessitated the importance of a meaningful dialogue between Government here and colleagues in the national Assembly? Such an approach is necessary to promote the language agenda required to build the truly bilingual Wales that I know he aspires to.

Mr Jim Hood (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Member for Arfon replies, I should point out that this is a half-hour debate and that the rules are different from those for one-and-a-half-hour debates. The hon. Gentleman has secured the debate and it is his decision whom he allows to intervene. Back Benchers are not permitted to speak at all without seeking the relevant permission. Those are the rules on the half-hour debate.

Hywel Williams: Thank you, Mr Hood. I have been approached by various hon. Members, and I will certainly allow at least one intervention from each of those people who have contacted me. This debate interests people from across the political and language spectrum in Wales, and I will take further interventions. However, I will also talk very quickly, as is my wont.

The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. A consensus has been built in Wales over many years, which I am afraid is in jeopardy because of this decision. That consensus has been built on proper dialogue between people who properly have an interest in the matter. That is not confined to any language group, any class or any political party. I say that as a member of Plaid Cymru.

There has been a lack of clarity about the Government's intentions and actions in the matter, not least in relation to elected Members such as myself. If I ask the Minister some naive and ill-informed questions, the cause of that may lie not with me but with how the matter has been handled. As with a good deal of the Government's programme, the impression has been given that it is being made up as they go along, with backtracking and amendment often the order of the day.

I would like to ask some questions, and the debate's timing in relation to the decisions that are now being made means it is essential we have answers as a matter of urgency. First, I scarcely need to say that the threats to S4C's future have caused huge concern in Wales and across Welsh society—both Welsh and English speaking—particularly among those who are concerned with the language. We have seen a stronger galvanising of the campaign for the Welsh language than there has been for many years—stronger even than with the campaign for new Welsh language legislation that took place some time ago.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman welcome yesterday's statement by a trustee of the BBC that guaranteed funding up until 2017 is on offer? That issue has caused great concern to all of us.

Hywel Williams: Indeed, I do. However, I will come on to some questions about that later.

As I was saying, there has been a campaign the like of which we have not seen for some time. A small example of that is the e-mail bombardment of members of the Public Bodies Bill Committee. I served on that Committee with the hon. Gentleman and others. I received 1,200 messages and I answered them all, which offered some relief to the people who sent them. Other Committee members from England were amazed at the volume of correspondence, the like of which they had not seen before. I doubt, in fact, that the Government predicted that supporters of S4C would be so galvanised.

I am not sure if the Minister and his colleagues knew the background to their decision on S4C—although perhaps he will correct me later. The Conservatives would have been wise to consult those in their own party who took the initial decision to set up S4C in the first place. Former Conservative Ministers took an honourable and constructive role in that decision.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I think I am one of the oldest lags in this debate, having written a document called "Television in Wales" in 1973, which became Labour party policy. It has been an extraordinary period, and the most extravagant hopes of those of us who were talking about the subject in 1973 have been more than realised. S4C has been an enormous success both artistically and as far as the language is concerned. I give the hon. Gentleman my full support and that of many members of my party.

Hywel Williams: I am very grateful for that point, which was very well made. As I said, the Conservatives and certainly the Liberal Democrats should have known better, with honourable exceptions. They should have read up on the history and on the conflict over the location of Welsh language programmes.

Mrs Siân C. James (Swansea East) (Lab): As someone who comes from the same town as Ian Jones, I am looking forward to great things from a Morristonian. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Governments persist in thinking that S4C and the BBC are not in competition with each other when they are? The idea that they will share producers and directors is of great concern.

Hywel Williams: I share the hon. Lady's concerns, which relate to some of the questions I will ask about the involvement of the BBC in S4C. I am sure that that can be managed with good will on all sides and a proper degree of independence and funding for S4C. I will return to that issue in a moment.

I was talking about the history, the conflict over the location of Welsh language programmes, the long campaign throughout the 1970s and the promise to set up the channel in the first place. That broken promise, the conflict, the arrests, the court cases and the jailings led many thousands of reasonable and normally law-abiding Welsh citizens to break the law and not pay their television licences. That consequence was a matter of regret to us all as parliamentarians. In fact, some people went even further in taking what was always non-violent direct action. The Government could have read up on the social conflict engendered and on Mrs Thatcher's first U-turn. Clearly they did not and they repeated their mistakes.

I have some questions for the Minister on the decision itself in the first place. What consultations were there with the people in Wales before the decision was made on funding, and subsequently on the inclusion of S4C in the Public Bodies Bill and its relationship with the BBC? Is he satisfied that all the relevant people were able to put their point of view forward? Were they heard, or does he concede, as some, possibly wrongly, suspect, that these decisions were made for reasons of policy here—cutting back public spending and cutting back on the size of the state—that had little to do directly with broadcasting in Wales? Indeed, some people suggest that they were heedless of the consequences to Wales, the Welsh language or the broadcasting industry. I have to tell the Minister that that is how it appeared.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate on this very important matter, about which many of my colleagues are concerned. Does he agree that the cuts facing S4C—even prior to the 2015 period, which has now become the 2017 period, for which we are supposed to be grateful—are actually greater and disproportionately greater than those facing the BBC, and that this is a total disgrace and shows the shambolic way the Government have treated S4C?

Hywel Williams: I agree that the cuts to S4C are probably going to be very deep indeed, and deeper than any reasonable broadcaster might be able to cope with given the long time scales of planning. I was just saying that that is how it appeared to people in Wales, but also to disinterested commentators. It is not just people who are taking particular sides who saw that. I am sure that that was not what the Government intended.

I would like to ask further questions beyond those about consultation, such as how the whole issue was handled. I will give a small example that will be familiar to those who were members of the Public Bodies Bill Committee. The agreement between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the BBC was made on 13 September. On the morning of 15 September, the Bill Committee met to discuss S4C. The debate continued from 1 pm onward. The Minister who replied to the debate, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath), referred to the BBC agreement in support of his argument. However, that agreement was not published until the afternoon of that day. It was too late to inform members of the Committee for that debate—although not the Report stage or on Third Reading—other than the Minister, of course, who had it in his hand. Was that completely coincidental? Why was the agreement not available on 13 or 14 September, or even on the morning of 15 September?

I raised this matter in a subsequent sitting of the Committee as a point of order, but to no avail. I have to tell the Minister here today that the impression given, rightly or wrongly, was of, at best, sharp practice. Consequently, he should realise that there are people in Wales who are now even more distrustful of the motives and action of the Government, and they will not be reassured by evasions or warm words. In fact, some might conclude that the wisest course of action for the Government would be to backtrack and restore at least part of the funding to S4C, to take S4C out of the Public Bodies Bill and, instead, consult and include any proposals in the forthcoming broadcasting Bill.

Given that they are unlikely to do that, and pressing on with my questions, I want to ask the Minister, and give him time to answer, rather than answer through his unfortunate friend, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome who had to face the Public Bill Committee. He did his best to answer. I know he did his best to answer. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps I would not go as far as "brilliant", but he is a very nice man.

On money, in the amended Public Bodies Bill, there is an undertaking for the Government to provide "sufficient" funding. This is mainly made up of a contribution by the BBC from the licence fee. I understand that that is supposed to be approximately £76 million in 2014-15. Will the Minister tell us what the contribution will be in 2015-16 and 2016-17, and the next two years? It is not clear to me, at least. I have heard two figures mentioned—£74 million, or is it £76 million? We are only talking about a couple of million, and we are used to talking in trillions in this place, but £2 million is a load of money. Will all the BBC money be devoted to production, as we have heard? Must it all be devoted to production? Must

[Hywel Williams]

it all be spent in the independent sector? Are these not decisions that S4C should be taking independently, rather than being directed?

Mr Elfyn Llwyd (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): May I just say that I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has been able to secure this debate? I am pleased with the attendance of hon. Members from all parties today, showing the depth of feeling in Wales about this issue. Will he please ask the Minister, if I can ask a question through him, what is the latest on the editorial independence of S4C?

Hywel Williams: I certainly will put those questions to the Minister, given that I have been speaking now for some 14 minutes. First, though, there is the question of administration. I understand that administering the channel costs about £20 million. From where is that to be obtained? I understand that the DCMS is to provide £7 million and that £3 million can be obtained from the channel's commercial activities. What about the other £10 million? Where will that come from?

On management and governance, the point raised by my right hon. Friend is pertinent. We come to the matter of S4C's independence. Again, the Government have assured us that S4C's independence will be guaranteed. Will the BBC be appointing people on the operational side, which is my understanding? If that is so, how many people and at what level? What will be their function? Will they be there to look after the BBC's interests? How can they avoid literally taking the BBC's side? For example, if S4C decides to bid for a particular sports event that is in competition with the BBC—the Government are in favour of competition, are they not?—where will the loyalties of those BBC appointees lie? Will it be with the channel, or will it be with the BBC? Will they have a veto or a super majority, whatever that might be?

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On the issue of competition with the BBC, I find that a very odd comment in view of the fact that the most popular programmes provided by S4C are actually provided for the channel by the BBC. Secondly, in terms of the independence of the channel and the concern that the hon. Gentleman raises in terms of BBC involvement, is it not the case that back in 1982 the S4C authority members were a minority on the board of S4C? Indeed, there were representatives from the independent television production sector. Yet S4C, launched in 1982, became a great success.

Hywel Williams: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me. It is possible to do this. It is possible to do this without the uncertainty that the Government have caused by how they have handled this issue. We are uncertain and I look to the Minister and the hon. Gentleman to reassure us that the highly successful co-operation that existed before is obtained again in the future. I am glad that he made that point.

As I was saying about the BBC appointees, will they have a veto? What about reporting back to the BBC? Will it be a matter of providing quarterly information reports? That is one thing, I suppose, but day-to-day reporting about individual decisions is quite another, so where does it lie?

In respect of the board, I take it that they will all be DCMS appointees. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that. What will be the BBC representation? What will the split be between the BBC representation and others? Will the Minister confirm that the board members loyalty will be to S4C and not to any body that appointed them? Is it not usually the case with such bodies that the first loyalty is to the body itself, whatever the sponsoring organisation? Surely, in the interests of securing the future, their loyalty must be to the channel.

Huw Jones, I think yesterday, said that S4C

> "will be an effective partner for the BBC—managing itself but being accountable to the BBC Trust for its use of licence money and to the Government for the other public money".

That is a very positive statement, and I hope that all hon. Members will take it as such. However, for this to be the case, all of the questions I put, and possibly more, must be answered before the people of Wales have any confidence that the Government are committed to ensuring the best possible television service for the Welsh-speaking audience and the future of S4C.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport (Mr Edward Vaizey): It is a great pleasure to appear once more under your chairmanship, Mr Hood. I am delighted to be taking part in this debate. It gives me a chance to outline the secure, new and positive phase in the distinguished history of S4C. Unlike the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), who, incidentally, I congratulate wholeheartedly and warmly on securing this important debate, I do not want to look to the past; I want to look to the future. For that reason, I welcome the appointment of the new chair, as well as the exciting announcement yesterday that Ian Jones is to be the new chief executive of S4C.

I want to dwell on the latter appointment, because it is indicative of the positive future of S4C. Mr Jones started his career at S4C in 1982 but went on to have an extraordinarily distinguished career in television broadcasting in the UK and in the United States. His current position is managing director of A&E Television Networks, which is one of the most successful cable companies in America and is based in New York. My hunch—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will correct me, if I am wrong—is that a man of the calibre of Ian Jones would not leave such a job to join a sinking ship. He leaves such a job to take on an exciting new challenge to rejuvenate a channel that sits at the heart of Welsh life and culture and to take it on to new challenges. The speech that Huw Jones gave yesterday to the Institute of Welsh Affairs was also given in such a climate. He talked about how S4C has to grapple with the challenges, but also about the huge opportunities provided by new technology.

I know my colleagues in Wales well enough to know that most of those taking part in the debate today know Huw Jones and Ian Jones well, and I suspect that they know that both those men are unlikely to be lapdogs of the BBC. Both will be S4C men, who will ensure that the channel has a successful future. My job as the

Minister is to do all that I can to help that to happen, so I am grateful that the hon. Member for Arfon indicated that he is prepared to be corrected on any impression or misrepresentation that the Government do not have a strategy for S4C; of course we have such a strategy. I am also grateful to him and his colleagues for reminding the House that S4C is a great achievement of a previous Conservative Government.

I am grateful, too, for the important interventions from the distinguished and hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who has been involved in this debate for 40 years—let us put it like that—from the hon. Members for Swansea East (Mrs James) and for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies).

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vaizey: Of course. To someone so distinguished, there can be no other answer.

Paul Flynn: It is extremely generous of the Minister to pay tribute to my contribution to the formation of S4C but I am afraid it was a minor one. At the time, I resigned from the office of chairman of the Broadcasting Council for Wales, but that had no significant effect. However, a threat from another, much more prominent politician to starve to death had a galvanic effect on the Conservative Government.

Mr Vaizey: I would not say that I remember the occasion well, but I know people who were involved in the debate, and they have told me about the important events which resulted in the creation of S4C.

The positive future of S4C was strengthened by our amendment to the Public Bodies Bill last month. The Bill will therefore ensure that S4C is funded at a level sufficient to meet its statutory remit. I am grateful to have the opportunity to reiterate the Government's commitment to a strong and sustainable future for S4C and for Welsh-language programming. We fully recognise the importance of the channel and its contribution to the cultural and economic life of Wales. As well as sustaining and promoting the Welsh language, the channel provides a focal point for the celebration of Welsh national events. On that basis, the Government secured the future of S4C in the comprehensive spending review.

We have heard a lot of talk about the amount of money available to S4C. The hon. Member for Arfon said that £2 million is "a load of money", so S4C has 45 loads of money—it is funded to the tune of £90 million—and by 2015 that funding will have reduced to only £83 million. S4C gets £20 million-worth of BBC programming for free, and it has substantial reserves. I do not need to reiterate the economic climate in which we are all operating, and most sensible people agree that £83 million is significant funding given the tough economic climate.

A partnership with the BBC is the best way to secure S4C's long-term sustainable future. My officials are working with S4C and the BBC Trust on the governance structure of the new partnership. Discussions have been productive and the agreement will, I am sure, soon be finalised. The amended BBC agreement laid before Parliament on 15 September confirms that the governance arrangements must not be made until discussions between S4C, the BBC and the Secretary of State have been concluded. Also, the hon. Gentleman can be reassured that we are committed to consulting on those governance arrangements with interested parties, including the Welsh Government and the people of Wales. We will consult all those who are interested, and we look forward to hearing his views.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs has produced a detailed report, which the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) agreed to. A key recommendation was that there should be no BBC staff on the day-to-day management board of S4C. How much pressure is the Minister putting on the negotiations to ensure that?

Mr Vaizey: I would not use "pressure" in that context. The partnership is one of people who are interested in the future of S4C, and includes S4C, the BBC and my officials. I am sure that we will announce our conclusions shortly and then consult interested parties. I also take the opportunity to say how much I enjoyed my appearance before the Welsh Affairs Committee discussing the future of S4C.

To go to the heart of the issue, I assure the hon. Member for Arfon that S4C will remain an independent service. It will retain its brand identity and its editorial independence. Furthermore, the crucial role that S4C plays in sustaining the Welsh independent television sector will be maintained, with 100% of S4C's commissioning budget being spent in the independent sector, as now. That is a crucial commitment which will ensure that S4C continues to support the Welsh creative industries and the wider creative community in Wales. In Wales, there is a clear-sighted strategy to support the many successful creative industries, which I wholeheartedly support.

Guto Bebb: On S4C supporting the creative industries in Wales, does the Minister have any concerns about the administration budget of S4C perhaps being cut by 10%, but the programming budget appearing to be cut by 25% due to decisions taken by S4C?

Mr Vaizey: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but it is incumbent on me to say that, given that S4C will be independent of the BBC, it is certainly not for a Minister to tell the channel how to spend its money. Given the accountability and transparency agenda, S4C must have heard his comments and will no doubt be writing to him to explain that position, as well as to the hon. Member for Arfon, who might want to make similar points.

I have already mentioned the Public Bodies Bill and how the new clause will for the first time set in statute a requirement that S4C receives sufficient funding. The hon. Member for Arfon expressed concerns about funding continuing beyond 2015. As my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire indicated in his intervention, there is effectively an agreement in principle that that funding will continue until 2017, although it still needs to be formally agreed—in effect, that offer is now on the table.

To step back from the details mentioned by the hon. Member for Arfon—if I have missed any, I will write to him—I want to add that S4C will remain independent. S4C staff will be appointed not by the BBC but by the S4C board and executive. S4C has significant funding and a secure future independent of but in partnership with the BBC. It has a great chairman and now a superb

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new chief executive. The future is bright for S4C. I pay tribute not only to my hon. Friends but to all hon. Members who have participated over the past few months in discussions about the future of S4C.

Question put and agreed to.

5 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 October 2011

[Mr Edward Leigh *in the Chair*]

Arms Export Controls

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Bill Wiggin.)*

2.30 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am glad to open what I hope and expect to be the first of our annual debates on the reports of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. First, I thank the members of the four Committees for their contributions to our report, which sets a high standard of detail, incisiveness and relevance to current events, with particular reference to north Africa and the middle east. I also thank the staff of our Committees for their invaluable contribution in bringing together our report, and I thank Ministers and their officials for the substantial volume of detailed information that they have provided to the Committees in the response to our report and in answer to our subsequent extensive questions. One of my objectives, which is shared by the members of the Committees, is to achieve a higher level of transparency in our work in the key area of arms export controls, and I believe that we have made a good start in that direction.

I start with various aspects of the arms export controls system. Much of the debate will focus on the situation in north Africa and the middle east, which I will come on to, but it is important to cover this central area of the controls system, and I begin with the Export Control Organisation. I see the attraction for the Government and, most particularly, for the Treasury of changing the system of funding for the ECO. The Government are considering a proposal whereby that funding is taken out of public expenditure and therefore from the general body of taxpayers and is made the responsibility of the arms exporting industry. There are, however, possible risks and dangers in going down that route, because a crucial feature of the ECO is its clear independence. We have no doubt whatever about the integrity of all the civil servants who work in the ECO, but the Government must answer the question of whether a change to the basis of its funding might change public perception from seeing the ECO as an independent watchdog to seeing it instead as a poodle of the arms exporting companies. That would be detrimental to the perception of our UK arms export controls. I hope that the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), and his colleagues will consider that point carefully.

We made recommendations about three particular issues: brass-plate companies, the pre-licence registration of arms brokers and extraterritorial arms export controls. I must express my acute disappointment that, six months after we published our report and its recommendations, we have still not received a substantive response from the Government on any of those three important policy areas. I put it to the Minister that we expect a substantive response on those three areas shortly, and certainly in good time before the Committees resume taking oral evidence in a few weeks.

On what are called military end-use controls, a key issue in how to deal with dual-use goods, I very much welcome the Government acting on the Committees' recommendation to produce specific proposals for strengthening such controls. I gather that the Government have now proposed a specific strengthening of article 4(2) of the relevant European Union regulation. I urge them to continue to press for the amendment of that article so that we can achieve greater strengthening of control over military end-use.

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): I am sorry to intervene so early in the right hon. Gentleman's speech. On that point, does he agree that we could urge the Government to look at the work on the on-sale of arms to third countries, and that we could do a little more to ensure that the arms that we are selling to friendly or neutral countries do not end up in the wrong hands?

Sir John Stanley: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady's point. That is one of the central areas on which we constantly keep watch. It is of prime importance that when an export licence is granted to a particular country for a particular piece of military equipment or particular goods, we as the exporting country know that that is where the items concerned will finish up. I am grateful to her for making that point.

I come now to sodium thiopental and torture end-use controls. An extremely creditable bit of investigative journalism revealed to us in the autumn of last year that a small company, in Acton I think, was exporting sodium thiopental to certain states in the United States that still use capital punishment and that the substance was among the chemicals used in the execution of prisoners. In other words, items coming out of this country were being used for capital punishment purposes in the United States. Our Committees were deeply concerned and the Government did react. We have debated with the Government whether they reacted quickly enough, but they did impose export controls on that particular item. We have now asked for those controls to be carried out more widely. I very much welcome that the Minister himself wrote to the EU High Representative Baroness Ashton and urged that the controls we brought in as the UK's national controls over the export of sodium thiopental should be applied EU-wide by means of an amendment to the EU torture goods regulation. I hope that the Government will continue to press for that important amendment to be made, so that we have EU-wide controls and ensure that, EU-wide, we are not making a chemical contribution to capital punishment executions in the US.

On the proposed international arms trade treaty, I am glad to tell the House that, since our report was published, the Committees have had a useful informal meeting with our former ambassador to the conference on disarmament in Geneva, John Duncan. I would like to put on the record that Ambassador Duncan performed outstandingly in his contribution to the preparatory committee phase of that key negotiation, and made a signal contribution to the current situation. We now have before us at least three quarters of a draft treaty, in

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a text, in advance of the crucial negotiating phase, which will take place next year. The Government in their response said:

> "The Government is committed to securing an effective, legally binding international Arms Trade Treaty. The UK continues to play a leading role in the UN process on the Arms Trade Treaty to this end."

I urge the Government to ensure that the UK continues to be a major driving force in hopefully bringing the treaty to a conclusion in 2012.

Finally on the arms export controls system, I come to bribery and corruption, and I want to make two points. First, our Committees recommended that an anti-corruption provision should be included in the arms trade treaty, and I trust that the Minister will assure us that the British Government will do all they can to ensure that that happens. Secondly, the Committees were somewhat concerned that the Government were taking too narrow a view in dealing with bribery and corruption with regard to arms exports. In our subsequent series of questions to the Government, we asked:

> "Will the Government confirm that if it becomes aware of corruption in arms deals it will, regardless of whether there is a risk of diversion or re-export under Criteria 7, take appropriate action under the provisions of the Bribery Act 2010?"

I am glad that in their latest response to us the Government have answered with an unequivocal "Yes", and that is very welcome indeed.

I come now to the Government's arms export policy in the light of the Arab spring, particularly in relation to arms that could be used for internal repression contrary to criterion 2 of the consolidated criteria and for provoking armed conflict contrary to criterion 3. I want to start by putting what I believe are the absolutely essential facts on the record since the Government announced their review of arms export licensing in the light of what has happened with the arrival of the Arab spring.

I am mystified why the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office keep saying that the first announcement of the review was made by the Foreign Secretary on 16 March in answer to a question from the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) at a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is clear from the documentation that the first announcement was made by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), in his press release on 18 February. It was a highly significant press release, to which I shall return.

In the wake of the announcement of that review, there has been a revocation of existing UK licences for arms exports on a scale and over a geographical area totally unprecedented since the Committees were first formed more than 10 years ago. I cannot over-emphasise the extent to which that is the most enormous jump from anything that has previously happened. From the documents that we have received from the Government, I believe that a total of 158 extant arms export licences to countries in north Africa and the middle east have been revoked as a result of internal repression or the risk of it as a consequence of the Arab spring. Those arms export licences have been revoked in no fewer than eight countries: Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Syria and Tunisia. When I say that the scale of the revocations is unprecedented, I contrast them with, for example, the revocations made by the previous Labour Government following the Israeli armed hostilities in Gaza. The number of revocations then, mainly in relation to components given by British exporters to the Israeli navy, were a handful, so this order of magnitude is unprecedented.

In our questions to the Government, we asked for a list of all the licences that have been revoked. It makes extremely interesting reading. They are all there in the Government's response—25 pages listing the revocations. It is extraordinarily helpful to the House and to the wider public that we now have that information. It lists in each case the end-user country and the details of the equipment sold. But there is one common denominator behind each and every revocation, and it is given in the "reasons" column. In every case, the reason for revocation was the Government's conclusion that the licence now contravenes criteria 2 and 3 of the consolidated criteria. I remind the House that criterion 2 states that no licence will be granted for

> "equipment which might be used for internal repression".

Criterion 3 states that no licences will be granted for equipment

> "which would provoke…prolong…or aggravate"

armed conflicts.

I and, I am sure, the whole House welcome the revocations absolutely, and we welcome the scale of the revocations, but the key point, which the Government seem to be reluctant to acknowledge, is that the scale of the revocations is the clearest possible evidence of the scale of the misjudgment that took place when the export licences were originally granted. The Government must address that—the scale of the misjudgment. The reality is that under the previous Government—we took our analysis back to January 2009—and under the present Government that misjudgment continued up to the dawn of the Arab spring, as journalists who managed to get into the ransacked British embassy in Tripoli found. They found papers there indicating that right up to the start of the Arab spring, we were engaged in major military support and military activities vis-à-vis the Gaddafi Government.

With that sort of background, one might have expected the Government in their response to be somewhat contrite, even apologetic, but sadly that has not been so. When I came face to face with the Foreign Secretary in the Foreign Affairs Committee on 7 September, I found his initial written statement giving the Government's interim view of their review—the 18 July statement—profoundly misleading, and I will explain why. It contained the following sentence:

> "The review concluded that there was no evidence of any misuse of controlled military goods exported from the United Kingdom."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2011; Vol. 531, c. 79WS.]

Of course there was no evidence. One has only to look through the 25 pages of items that we exported to see that their nature was overwhelmingly such that their origin could not be identified when they reached the specified countries. They were made up of electronics, communications equipment, cryptography, ammunition and sniper rifles. There are no Union Jacks on bullets and sniper rifles. The Foreign Secretary said that there was no evidence, but of course there was no evidence, and we did not have anyone on the ground anyway.

The Foreign Secretary continued:

> "Consultations with our overseas posts revealed no evidence that any of the offensive naval, air or land-based military platforms used by Governments in north Africa or the middle east against their own populations during the Arab spring, were supplied from the United Kingdom."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2011; Vol. 531, c. 79WS.]

I tabled a question to find out what offensive naval, air or land-based military platforms we had supplied to countries that were the main focus of internal repression in north Africa and the middle east during the Arab spring. Last week, the Minister replied: to Bahrain, none; to Egypt, none; to Syria, none; to Tunisia, none; to Yemen, none. At that point, he must have breathed a sigh of relief in thinking that he was about to break the Government's duck, and he said that we may have sold up to 12 armoured personnel carriers to Libya. He was, however, obliged to add:

> "We cannot verify whether these items were actually exported."—[*Official Report*, 12 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 443W.]

Therefore, the Foreign Secretary's statement suggesting that all is well and that none of the offensive military platforms exported from Britain have been used in the countries under discussion is based on a complete chimera. I have great respect and admiration for the Foreign Secretary, but if his officials, who no doubt drafted that statement, think that they can pull the wool over the eyes of the Committees on Arms Export Controls and of the House, they are making a serious mistake that I hope will not be repeated.

The Foreign Secretary's most recent statement on 13 October was a distinct improvement, but I still need to be persuaded that the Government have addressed the root of the problem that has been illustrated by the Arab spring and the revocations that we have been obliged to make. The Foreign Secretary stated:

> "The review concluded that there are no fundamental flaws with the UK export licensing system."

It may—or may not—be true that there are no flaws in the system, but I am not persuaded that the Government are addressing the key point about flawed judgments within the system. The inescapable fact is that judgments have been shown to be wildly over-optimistic and rose-tinted regarding the sale to authoritarian regimes of weapons that could be used for internal repression.

The Foreign Secretary continued:

> "The Government propose to introduce a mechanism to allow immediate licensing suspension to countries experiencing a sharp deterioration in security or stability,"

but that does not address the central problem, because suspension becomes relevant only after export licensed goods have moved out of the UK. Suspension means that a licence has already been granted and that the goods have left the UK and are out of the door—the bullets have bolted and are in the hands of an authoritarian regime. Although a better system of suspension would provide a good safety net, it does not deal with the central issue of making a correct initial judgment about whether to grant an export licence.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) *rose—*

Sir John Stanley: If the hon. Gentleman will wait one moment, I will finish my point.

The Foreign Secretary added:

> "We also propose the introduction of a revised risk categorisation,".—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 41WS.]

That is a crucial sentence but its meaning is wholly unclear, and it is an issue that the Committees must scrutinise and look at in considerable detail in their next report. They will need to be persuaded that the substantial errors of judgment that have taken place will not reoccur.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman did not accept my intervention the second I offered it, because he has partially answered my question. Given that the Foreign Secretary's review went on for some time, was the right hon. Gentleman surprised at how little detail it contained about how the proposed changes will be delivered? There were a relatively small number of suggestions about possible outcomes, but little detail on how those outcomes would be delivered. Having read the review, is the right hon. Gentleman confident that the Foreign Secretary has told the House exactly how improvements will be delivered?

Sir John Stanley: As I have said, I remain to be persuaded that the Government have satisfactorily addressed the key issue regarding the scale of misjudgments that have taken place. The key sentence is the one about new criteria, which I have quoted. The hon. Gentleman is right that we need a great deal more detail about what that statement means in terms of the export controls system and how it will be operated by the Government in future.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sorry that I missed the first part of the right hon. Gentleman's speech and I thank him for the way in which he is presenting the report. He makes a good point about the suspension of licences. Is it the case, however, that licences are suspended once weapons or equipment are used and the media choose to report it? The abuse of human rights has been going on for a long time. The abuse of human rights in Bahrain is not new, and neither is the abuse of individual human rights in Saudi Arabia. What is different in Bahrain is that the world's media have been on the ground reporting on the treatment of those who are opposed to the regime, which has provoked the suspension.

Sir John Stanley: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the serious abuses of human rights that have occurred in all those countries subject to revocation orders—I would also add Saudi Arabia, to which I am about to refer, even though there has been no revocation thus far—have been going on for a long period. That poses the central question whether the Government have done enough to ensure that in future we do not put weapons that can be used for internal repression into the hands of regimes in which the abuse of human rights is endemic.

I have three final points. First, I believe that the Government are skating on thin ice in their present policy of the non-revocation of a single arms export licence to Saudi Arabia. I understand the reasons for that policy, but regret that so far the Government have been less than forthcoming—indeed, pretty much non-forthcoming—about the real reasons why they treat Saudi Arabia so differently from those other countries to which I have referred. I am in no doubt about the reasons behind the Government's policy: there is an intelligence dimension, an oil dimension and a British business interest, all of which are perfectly relevant and legitimate ministerial considerations. I believe, however,

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that the Government would do better to be open with the House and the Committees about why their policy towards Saudi Arabia is so conspicuously different from that applied to the other countries in question. I hope that Ministers will reflect on that point.

As I have said, the Government are skating on thin ice in their policy of non-revocation in Saudi Arabia. Among the important questions that we asked in our supplementary responses to the Government response, we asked the Government to state the totality of the extant arms export licences to Saudi Arabia and their value. I am glad to say that we have been provided with that information. Those members of the Committees who are present have the information and know that there are pages and pages of it. I am grateful to the Government for giving us that detail, but I intend to offer hon. Members the details of just one little box among the multitude of boxes relating to extant export licences to Saudi Arabia. It refers to

> "assault rifles, blank ammunition, components for assault rifles, components for general purpose machine guns, components for machine pistols, components for pistols, components for rifles, components for semi-automatic pistols, components for submachine guns, general purpose machine guns, machine pistols, pistols, rifles, semi-automatic pistols, submachine guns, training small arms ammunition".

That is just one little box among a multitude, and hon. Members will immediately see that each and every one of the items to which I have referred is usable for internal repression.

Alongside that, I place a report that appeared recently in the British press about the way in which, in the wake of the Arab spring, the Saudi security authorities were dealing with unrest among the Shi'a minority in Saudi Arabia. The report related to the Shi'a town of Awamiya. It stated that

> "there have been protests for democracy and civil rights since February, but in the past the police fired into the air. This is the first time they have fired live rounds directly into a crowd."

There is a huge plethora of weapons, components and munitions that are now in Saudi Arabia, exported from this country, that are not, in value terms, part of the very high end of British exports, which for Saudi Arabia are for national defence, self-defence and so on. Alongside those is this group of exports, which are wholly available to be used for internal repression. I will not be at all surprised if, before the Arab spring runs its course, the British Government find that they have no alternative but to end their policy of absolute non-revocation of any arms export licences to Saudi Arabia.

My second point is that a crucial recommendation made by the Committees has not been answered:

> "We further recommend that the Government extends immediately its review of UK arms export licences announced by the FCO Minister, Mr Alistair Burt, on 18 February 2011 to authoritarian regimes worldwide in respect of arms or components of arms which could be used for internal repression."

The Government said in their response:

> "Although this review was originally commissioned in response to events in the Middle East and North Africa, any conclusions will apply to our procedures for arms exports to all countries."

Applying conclusions to all countries is a different matter from the particular question that we asked—whether the Government would extend their review to authoritarian regimes worldwide. I therefore put these questions to the Minister. Did the Government extend their review to authoritarian regimes worldwide? If not, why not? If they did, have they decided whether to make any revocations of existing arms export licences as being in contravention of criteria 2 and 3? If they have made any such revocations, what are the specific licence revocations and to what countries do they relate? Those are the questions to which we want answers. I hope that the Minister will assure us that we will receive those answers very soon.

Finally, I come to the Government's policy on exporting arms and equipment to countries where they might be used for internal repression. In my remarks so far, I have had to be somewhat critical of some of the comments made by Foreign Office Ministers, but at this point I warmly commend the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), on his statement announcing the Government's review of arms export controls on 18 February. He got the wording and the punctuation, which is critical, absolutely correct. I shall read into the record and for the benefit of hon. Members the key sentence from the Minister:

> "The longstanding British position is clear: We will not issue licences where we judge there is a clear risk that the proposed export might provoke or prolong regional or internal conflicts,"—

that comma is crucial—

> "or which might be used to facilitate internal repression."

That is absolutely correct wording and punctuation, from which hon. Members will see that there are in fact two separate tests. There is the "clear risk" test as to whether the proposed export could aggravate conflict. If we had just the "clear risk" test, we could probably end up justifying the sale of pretty well anything to any country. We could say, "Well, there's a bit of a risk, but it's not a clear risk, so we can sell." We would probably draw the line at Chairman Kim Jong Il in North Korea, President Mugabe and the Burmese military junta, but for everyone else, we could say, "Well, the risk isn't clear. Let's get on and sell."

That is why the second part—the remainder—of the Minister's statement is critical:

> "or which might be used to facilitate internal repression."

I say very firmly to this Minister and to the House that the Committees on Arms Export Controls attach the utmost importance to that wording and to its retention by the British Government, so that we can be assured that British weapons and equipment will not be used for internal repression.

I hope that I have not gone on too long. I hope that our report has been truly helpful to the House and to the wider public. I very much look forward to hearing the contributions of other right hon. and hon. Members, and of course I await the Minister's reply.

3.7 pm

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I congratulate the Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls on the way in which he has presented the report today. He has said many things that many of us who are members of the Committees fully agree with, and I suspect that many other hon. Members will also be pleased that someone in his position has said those things, because the reality is that Governments of all political persuasions have followed a course whereby they have misjudged the risks that arms being sold by Britain have presented not only under authoritarian regimes in the middle east and Africa, but under many regimes throughout the world.

The reason for that may well be the huge economic benefits that Britain has acquired in the past from the arms trade. I believe that Britain is second only to the United States in terms of the money that it makes from the arms trade. I understand that in response to a freedom of information request by the Campaign Against Arms Trade, it was confirmed that between 2000 and 2009 the UK took $93 billion in defence exports. This is a key debate for us all, because we need to recognise that there is huge economic and political pressure on Governments of all persuasions to allow the trade to continue. It is therefore important that the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which were established by the previous Labour Government, have continued in this Parliament. I welcome the report and today's debate on it, and I hope that that is a sign that we will have regular debates on this issue and that the Government will listen carefully to what the Committees say.

I am a junior member of the Committees, which I joined fairly recently. When I first joined, one concern was that the Government were perhaps not treating the Committees as seriously as had previously been the case. That was partly because the report that the Government provided the Committees with was far shorter than previous reports, although the Minister will no doubt assure me that it made up for that in quality. The fact that more junior Ministers were sent to give evidence to the Committees also led to concern. I therefore urge the Government to ensure they do not create the impression that the Committees and their work on this issue are not being treated seriously.

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Mark Prisk): Specifically on that point, and as a junior member of the Government, let me assure the hon. Lady that both Cabinet Ministers I work with on this issue take it very seriously. Indeed, she is right to say that just because a Government report is brief that does not necessarily mean it does not answer the questions, and I hope the subsequent information we provided, which the Chair of the Committee identified, highlights that. I hope she will accept that point.

Katy Clark: I thank the Minister for that intervention.

In many ways, successive Administrations have dealt with this issue in a similar fashion, as the report makes clear. In the early days of this Government, however, Ministers seemed keen to promote arms exports from the UK—indeed, that was true before they took office. In a speech to the Royal United Services Institute in February 2010, the former Defence Secretary talked about maximising

"the UK's share of global defence exports".

That points to a dilemma and a conflict, given the economic interests of Britain and of many of the companies that produce these weapons up and down the country—as constituency MPs, we are very aware of the job implications of this trade—and the fact that the weapons used by authoritarian, oppressive regimes have been sold under successive British Governments.

As everyone in the Chamber will be aware, it was reported during the Arab spring that authoritarian regimes used British weapons to repress their own people. Weapons sold during 2010 to countries such as Bahrain included CS hand grenades, sniper rifles, shotguns and tear gas—the kinds of weaponry it would be reasonable to expect that authoritarian regimes would use for internal repression. Indeed, Libya was sold crowd-control ammunition, small-arms ammunition and tear gas among other things. In the first eight months of 2010, the weapons sold to Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, among other countries in the region, were all of the type that we would expect regimes to use in internal repression.

This week, Campaign Against Arms Trade reported that although sales to the region dipped in March, they increased from April to June. It also reported that the Government have approved arms exports of about £1.7 billion to Saudi Arabia. It would therefore be useful if the Minister were to confirm whether there has been an increase in the sales of weaponry in recent months, particularly to the middle east and north Africa. As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has said, there is always a fear that Governments react only when there is media attention and political focus on an issue. I hope that the fact that there has been a response to the Arab spring and that a review has been announced means that we will start reviewing these issues and look at not only the short term, but the long-term policy.

One issue that I want to focus on, which the Chair of the Committees did not focus strongly on, is the work the Government are doing in the lead-up to the arms trade treaty, which we hope will be in place in 2012. Will the Government give us assurances that they are doing everything possible to ensure that we achieve as robust a treaty as possible and that Britain is at the forefront of work to ensure that the treaty has an impact worldwide?

One issue I have looked at recently is the manufacture of depleted uranium armaments. I would be interested to hear the Minister outline the Government's position on that and particularly on achieving international regulation of such weaponry. The Committees have been given evidence that some states that have traditionally looked to the UK for leadership are concerned that it is not giving as much political priority to achieving an international arms trade treaty as was the case previously. I would be grateful if the Minister were to assure us that everything is being done to ensure that Britain looks carefully at how our weaponry is used abroad and that we have more robust international legislation, so that we are not alone in trying to ensure that we achieve progress.

Much of the Committees' report focuses on the use of weaponry for internal repression, but there are, of course, far broader issues associated with the arms trade. It is difficult to know whether it is possible to have an ethical arms trade, but many of us hope that we can move towards a position where Britain is not as reliant on the defence industry and has a more diverse, balanced economy. There has been a lot of debate recently about our dependence on the financial sector, but many of us feel that Britain should be ashamed of our dependence on the defence industry and that we should move towards a position where we are less

[Katy Clark]

reliant on it and do not, therefore, feel under such pressure to ensure that the trade in armaments continues with repressive and undemocratic regimes.

3.18 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) on his typically detailed and forceful presentation of the position adopted by the Committees on Arms Export Controls. I have served on the Committees on and off for almost 15 years; I served on them as a member of the Select Committee on Defence, I served on them in the previous Parliament and I am serving on them again in this Parliament. I have to say, therefore, that the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely assiduous in his relentless pursuit of officials and Ministers. When he issues officials in a Department with a gentle warning, they need to heed it; if they do not, they will get many more communications in the long run than if they had heeded it quickly.

I want to begin by referring to last week's written ministerial statement by the Foreign Secretary. Tucked away in the back of it is a paragraph about how the Government can also consider how we can

> "strengthen our decision making when we provide security and justice assistance overseas."

Those issues are linked, because there are countries to which we export weaponry, where we also provide training and engage in intelligence co-operation, and give help to the civil power on such things as counter-narcotics.

It is in that context that I want to talk about two countries; and in doing so I want to raise a wider question about lack of transparency on relevant questions. Our Committee receives detailed information, some of it confidential, about arms exports. We receive detailed breakdowns of the value and general scope of the categories of weaponry, and we know which categories exports are in—general or specific. We have information about those that are refused and revoked. However, unfortunately, similar information is not available about some other areas. I could give numerous examples, but will quote just a few.

The British Government do not sell significant quantities of weaponry to Colombia. That country has had a very difficult human rights legacy: an insurgency, drug cartels, and assassinations and murders of politicians, trade unionists and human rights activists. It is thought that it is still the country with the largest number of murders of trade unionists. However, we have had—and this goes back to the Labour Government—a period of systematic co-operation on counter-narcotics with the Colombian Government and their forces. Yet successive parliamentary questions have been put to Ministers over the years, and we never receive any detail. In November 2010 such a question received the answer:

> "Our counter-narcotics work in Colombia is scrupulously monitored to ensure it cannot contribute to any human rights abuses. We do not discuss the detail of this narcotics work publicly as doing so risks putting UK and Colombian lives in danger."—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2010; Vol. 519, c. 551W.]

A similar answer, received in July 2010, was:

> "The only military aid we provide to Colombia is for the ongoing programme of counter-narcotics assistance. It would not be appropriate to provide details about this programme, as to do so would prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the armed forces."—[*Official Report*, 12 July 2010; Vol. 513, c. 446W.]

To go back to the time of the previous Government—I am criticising the general approach, not the present Government—this answer was given in December 2009:

> "We do not disclose the value of our counter-narcotics assistance to Colombia. To do so would put British and Colombian lives at risk. This decision has been upheld by the parliamentary ombudsman."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2009; Vol. 498, c. 935W.]

There is a problem, and a serious question of accountability to Parliament. We are told by Ministers that the human rights situation in Colombia is not as bad as many critics say. We are told by the Colombian Government that the situation is improving, and that things are not as difficult or bad as they were. They accept that there were terrible things in the past, but they are doing their best. However, there is no transparency, and if the Government are to deal with the deep concerns that we have, they should provide more detailed information. We get information about arms exports, but not about military support or training support for counter-narcotics work in Colombia.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for the way he puts the case of Colombia. Does he accept that there is a problem, because in making their assessments, Governments tend to work on the dangerous assumption that the armed forces are a seamless whole, working under the orders of civilian Government control? They do not necessarily think that those forces will have an osmotic relationship with irregular forces, militias, drug dealers or anyone else. Supplying arms to an army somewhere like Colombia—and there are other places like it—means, in reality, providing resources that can go anywhere and be used for any kind of repression.

Mike Gapes: I accept that that is a danger. Obviously, countries vary considerably, and Ministers and ministries vary too. Sometimes the problem is not institutional; there may be a personnel problem, involving those who have corrupt or political links with people or organisations carrying out a parallel policy.

Speaking of parallel policies, I want to discuss what has been happening in Sri Lanka. There was a period under the previous Government when we were selling a large quantity of armaments to Sri Lanka. That was mainly during the ceasefire, which lasted about two years and then broke down. At that time, a large number of export licences to Sri Lanka were revoked. As of 2009, when the civil war between the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil Tigers came to its conclusion, exports from this country were very limited. However, the Sri Lankan armed forces undoubtedly used vast quantities of stockpiled imported ammunition, munitions and weaponry for their armed forces on land and their naval forces. Much of that undoubtedly came from the United Kingdom.

It now seems that the Sri Lankan Government have been lobbying very hard, both before and since the change of Government in this country in 2010, for a relaxation of the current restrictions on arms exports to Sri Lanka. I should like the Minister to give me an assurance that there is no change in export policy on Sri Lanka, and that we are not satisfied that the human rights situation has improved sufficiently for there to be a change of policy. A few months ago, the Government stated that we were awaiting the outcome of an internal assessment by the commission established by the Sri Lankan Government, which is due to report next month, before determining whether to press for an independent international inquiry into the serious allegations of war crimes committed in 2009. Those were documented on Channel 4 and elsewhere, and by the special representative established by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon. Will the Minister assure me that that means there will be no relaxation until we are satisfied that there has been a significant change of approach in Sri Lanka?

The reason why I raise such concerns is that reports have appeared—for example, Jason Burke's in *The Guardian* on 13 October—about the number of unofficial visits made by the former Secretary of State for Defence and his personal adviser Mr Werritty to Sri Lanka, and the number of meetings that took place between the Minister in question and senior figures in the Sri Lankan Government. I shall give just one quotation, but there are many. The article in *The Guardian*, talking about 2009, before the general election, states:

> "With political officers in London telling Sri Lanka that Labour was almost certain to lose coming elections, Fox was seen in Colombo as a major potential asset…Sources say now that they received specific information that Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the feared defence secretary and the brother of the president, had asked Fox to lobby for more access to British weapons."

Fortunately, the next paragraph states:

> "In fact, with evidence of human rights abuses within Sri Lanka mounting, the restrictions were tightened."

That was under the Labour Government before the general election. Since then, we have seen a number of visits by Ministers and contacts made with the Sri Lankan Government. I would like to know what matters were discussed. Was a relaxation of arms export restrictions on Sri Lanka discussed in meetings between Defence and other Ministers and representatives of the Sri Lankan Government? If so, what was our Government's response to any request?

It seems that a parallel policy has been going on. Jim Pickard wrote the following in the *Financial Times* on 12 October:

> "Last year a memorandum of understanding was struck between the Sri Lankan government and…two funds",

the first being the Sri Lanka infrastructure development fund and the second being the Sri Lanka charitable fund. He continued:

> "A trust set up by Liam Fox to help Sri Lanka's development appears to have achieved nothing other than to pay for the MP's trips to the country".

My question to the Minister is, why was the former Secretary of State visiting Sri Lanka? Did he discuss arms exports to Sri Lanka or a relaxation of the British policy of restricting defence exports to that country? It is important that those questions be answered, because we know that the Sri Lankan Government have been lobbying hard since 2009 for what they regard as a normalisation of their relationships with a number of countries, in an effort to return to receiving a large amount of weaponry and components, which they had been getting from the UK for many years before 2009.

As I understand it, the Foreign Secretary has been to Sri Lanka only once since the general election, but the former Defence Secretary has been there three times in the past year to meet its President. He also attended the national convention of the President's political party. I wonder whether there was a consistency regarding the policies on arms exports—

Mr Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is experienced. I am sure that he has read the report carefully and will be careful to relate his comments closely to it, and not veer too widely into the former Defence Secretary's activities.

Mike Gapes: I will do so. I wish simply to point out that there is an important restriction on Sri Lanka receiving arms exports at the moment. My concern is whether there is any information that may have led Ministers to become aware that there have been attempts to change that policy. If not, I would like an assurance on that. The four Select Committees have jointly raised the issue of arms exports to Sri Lanka in successive reports. We also took evidence and questioned Ministers, officials and other organisations when they came before our Committee, both in the previous year and before that.

Finally, I would like to return to what is happening in the Arab world. The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling rightly highlighted the problem of what might happen in countries that have not yet gone through a revolutionary transformation. We know that the Bahraini regime was, at its request, propped up by neighbouring Gulf Co-operation Council states. Armed forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates went into Bahrain. As far as I am aware, they have done a policing operation and have not been engaged. There is no evidence of a repression by those forces in Bahrain. However, the political situation there remains fraught. Its regime is a monarchy, but it is a minority in Bahraini society: it is a Sunni regime ruling a majority Shi'a population in a volatile region. Neighbouring Iran has territorial ambitions on Bahrain and is undoubtedly meddling in the politics of the Arab world.

There is potential for further serious violence in Bahrain. At the moment, we need to be careful about what that violence could do to trigger wider Sunni-Shi'a violence, not just there but in other parts of the region. There is a significant Shi'a minority in Saudi Arabia, and we need to be aware that the Saudi regime, even though it is more popular than some other regimes in the region, has a potential problem. Saudi Arabia has a growing, young population that lacks employment opportunities. If world oil prices go down, as they seem to be doing at the moment, the regime will no longer be able to use its money in the same way to buy off potential discontent. We need to be aware that exported British arms could then become available in a volatile situation. The Government need to look ahead not just one or two years, but to what kind of Arab world or Gulf we will have, and what Britain's role will be. Which side will we be on?

3.37 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to take part in the debate. I thank the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) for the way in which he introduced it and the thorough nature of the report. Parliament has come a long way over the past 15 years. We now have the Committees to monitor arms exports, an annual debate and the facility to hold the Government to account on

[Jeremy Corbyn]

individual export licences. That is a great improvement from the past, when there was no facility whatsoever to discuss the issues in any way. I therefore want to thank the MPs who have campaigned for that successful change in Parliament's procedures on the issue over the years. Clearly, if the procedures are to work, this debate has to work, and it is more than a little disappointing that so few Members are present this afternoon. Many Members regularly sign early-day motions and other things condemning human rights abuses and arms exports to repressive regimes, so it is a shame that they cannot be here to develop that case.

I want to raise many issues, but I realise that even with the paucity of Members, there is still a limit on time. I want to draw attention to the points made by the Select Committee report, particularly the reference made to the judgment and misjudgment of successive Governments concerning what is happening in the Arab world, north Africa and the middle east in particular.

There is a recommendation on enforcement, particularly against brass-plate companies, which are companies that are registered in the UK but trading in arms from overseas locations. I realise that that is quite a complex and difficult legal area to deal with, but we have to be tough on British-based operations that in reality evade any export controls on arms that end up being used for repression. Page 3 of the report states that

> "there is no justification for allowing a UK person to conduct arms exports overseas that would be a criminal offence if carried out from the UK and we recommend that the Government extends extra-territoriality to all items on the Military List in Category C."

The last point to which I wish to draw attention is the end-use of torture equipment, much of which is not obviously torture equipment but ends up being used as such when it arrives in the hands of a particularly repressive regime.

Earlier, I intervened on the right hon. Gentleman to ask about the revocation of arms export licences to Bahrain, but the same could apply to a number of other places. It simply is not good enough to decide that an armed force in a particular country is following all the relevant Geneva conventions when there is a civil conflict going on in that society. I mentioned Colombia, but I could have also included the Congo and many other societies around the world, where the army is simply not an insular institution that is following Government orders. It is often dominated by rogue elements, and there is an inevitable crossover between them, militia activities, criminal activities and drug-related gangs. The same could apply in many other countries in Central America where there is not a large volume of British arms exports but nevertheless there are deep suspicions of the involvement of armed forces in wholly illegal and illicit activities that provoke civilian conflict. At one level, the army presents itself as a reasonable organisation, but at another level, it is not.

If we think back to the 1970s, British planes and other equipment and arms were sold to Chile under the elected Government of Salvador Allende. Those planes were then used to bomb the presidential palace, which resulted in the death of the President and the terrible night of Pinochet's years. Selling arms has an effect, even if they are sold to a regime that we might agree with or, at that stage, approve of. We must be careful to condemn human rights abuses when the arms concerned have been provided by us in the first place.

On the question of the suspension of arms exports to Israel, particularly surrounding Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), had an interesting exchange of views with the Chair of the Select Committee. On 10 February 2011, he said:

> "I can confirm that UK policy on the export of controlled goods and equipment to Israel has not changed since the Coalition Government took office. All export licence applications to Israel are considered on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Export Licensing Criteria."

The Select Committee then quite rightly said:

> "We further recommend that if the Government is unable to identify any such arms or components of arms, it formally withdraws the statement of policy quoted in this paragraph."

There is a belief that the weapons are actually used to further the occupation of the west bank and Gaza and not for the national defence of Israel. This is a critical area of policy that needs to be further examined.

We have been listening to what is happening in Libya. The death of Colonel Gaddafi was announced a few hours ago, and there will now be a different Government. An interesting picture appeared on Facebook yesterday, showing a montage of European leaders literally having hugs and kisses and embraces with Colonel Gaddafi. No one was spared and no one is missing and all the pictures were taken in the last two years. The arms that have been sold to Libya were being delivered up until March of this year, and we were training Libyan forces until then, too. There was a close economic relationship with Colonel Gaddafi's Government, as I do not doubt there will now be with the Transitional National Council. It looks a tad of a short space of time, between March 2011 and October 2011, to be selling arms to a Government who, a month later, we decided were deeply oppressive and had to be opposed by all means—indeed, NATO forces helped to oppose that particular Government—to the current situation. What goes round comes round. The suggestion of hypocrisy in the policies conducted by successive western European Governments must be considered very carefully.

I am pleased that arms exports to Bahrain have been stopped. The human rights abuses there are serious. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) mentioned the Gulf Co-operation Council forces that are in Bahrain. Yes, they are in Bahrain and they are part of the Gulf Co-operation Council agreement, but in reality, their presence there bolsters the Government of Bahrain and protects them in their wish to continue their existence.

Human rights abuses in Bahrain are not new. I first met people from Bahraini human rights groups at a UN conference in 1986, which is an awfully long time ago. They were concerned about the suspension of the constitution, the lack of parliamentary democracy, or its limited nature, and the discrimination in that society and they have been bravely campaigning on those issues ever since then. The request to suspend arms sales to Bahrain is not a new one, and I am glad that it has now been carried out. We have also exported a great deal of surveillance equipment to the country, which has been used on the opposition and resulted in imprisonment, torture and all kinds of other things. I welcome the suspension of sales, which appears in great detail in the Select Committee report and the Government's response to it.

Saudi Arabia, which has been mentioned by two of the previous speakers, is the biggest single importer of British arms. The sales between Britain and Saudi Arabia are absolutely massive. It still makes me angry to think about how the previous Prime Minister bar two, Tony Blair, intervened to suspend a Serious Fraud Office investigation into the al-Yamamah arms contract with Saudi Arabia. He said that it was not in the national interest to investigate that particular contract because it was too big and too important to BAE Systems. I am sorry but if we are serious about human rights, democracy and protecting people's lives, we should be equally serious about what we sell, what we export, what we profit from and what practices we condone by not being prepared to investigate them. I hope that the regime of control of arms exports that the Committees suggest is something that the Government will take on board.

The last couple of points that I want to mention come from the Amnesty briefing, which says:

> "It is vital that a strong commitment to human rights and international law are a core part of the final ATT."

It then urges the UK Government to

> "Prevent sceptical governments from trying to use the 'consensus' as a way of watering down or de-railing the ATT process.
>
> Prevent a weak treaty from being a dangerous backwards step for human rights and international law.
>
> Express support for the ATT to include the 'Golden Rules' that prevent transfers"—

so that there is a proper end-user system, and—

> "Support comprehensive scope, including conventional weapons of all kinds."

We are talking in part about highly sophisticated weaponry, night-sight equipment, surveillance equipment and all the rest of it, but I have seen—as have other Members in this Chamber—the most appalling abuses of human rights in the Congo and other places. There is nothing sophisticated about any of it. There is nothing sophisticated about the weaponry that is used. It is a lot of second-hand Kalashnikovs and second-hand weapons that have been bought on the open market anywhere around the world. Those weapons are used to create the most appalling mayhem that kills a very large number of wholly innocent people who are merely trying to survive in an area that, unfortunately, is blessed with huge mineral wealth, which is of greater interest to mining companies than the human rights of the people concerned.

We have a lot to learn from what has happened in the past few months. I welcome the fact that arms exports have been suspended in many cases. I hope that the Minister will take on board the point that I made in an intervention to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South concerning the examination of the role of a military in a particular society, the quasi-independence under which the military operate and the activities that the military might be wholly illegally engaged in. It is not good enough for the Government of a particular country to come along and say, "Our military do what we say," when we have a great deal of suspicion—indeed, there may well be a lot of common suspicion among other countries—about what the military in that country actually do.

My hon. Friend asked a very specific question about Sri Lanka and I thought that it was a very good and very fair question. The Government of Sri Lanka were very quick to use the ceasefire process to stock themselves up with large amounts of arms while arms sales to Sri Lanka are currently suspended. There is a huge diplomatic initiative by the Government of Sri Lanka to be allowed to buy arms all around the world. The human rights situation in Sri Lanka is not right: there are still too many people in prison; there are still too many people suffering; and there is still a lack of a rehabilitation process that can bring about a proper peace there. Given those factors, we have no business to be selling arms to Sri Lanka.

Mr Prisk: I did not have the chance earlier, because the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) moved on to other topics, but for his assurance, the House's assurance and the assurance of the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), I am happy to say that the policy on Sri Lanka has not changed, and that is a categorical position.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Minister for that intervention and I am very relieved to hear that, because the lobbying on this matter by the Sri Lankan Government is quite intensive.

In conclusion, I want to echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark). If we as a country rely on a large volume of arms exports and on an arms industry, we run the risk of being culpable in the abuse of human rights, the killing of civilians and the promotion of conflict. We should think quite seriously about these things and about the role that we play. Perhaps we should instead embark on a longer-term strategy of being less dependent on the arms industry and arms exports, and put the skills in the arms industry towards the creation of more socially useful products. The skills and abilities in the arms industry are fantastic, and the knowledge in the industry is incredible, but that knowledge can be used for good things just as much as it can be used to produce weapons that can end up causing the most appalling destruction, even if that was not the intention behind their use when they were initially exported.

3.52 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Leigh, for calling me to speak.

I start by welcoming the work that has been done by the Committees under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley). The work that has been done by the Committees, including the production of this report, and the extent of the scrutiny that the Government are under in this area do great credit to the right hon. Gentleman and the Committees. I hope that he will pass on the thanks and warm congratulations of the Labour party and, I believe, of Members from all parties for the work that the Committees are doing. That work is unquestionably adding tremendously to the transparency in this important area, and it is extremely valuable. The success that the Committees have had on the decision about sodium thiopental was a worthwhile sign of the importance of their scrutiny.

[Toby Perkins]

The Committees have scrutinised the statements that have come from the Government, particularly the recent statement from the Foreign Secretary. The right hon. Gentleman was somewhat generous in saying that the Foreign Secretary could not be blamed as he was only reading out the words that his officials had put in front of him. I am sure that there are many Secretaries of State who would be grateful to be scrutinised in that way. None the less, it is clear that a very thorough piece of work has been done by the Committees.

I will talk about some of the contributions to the debate, but prior to that I will talk briefly in my capacity as the shadow small business Minister about the importance of the defence industry. The defence policy, as has been expressed by the Government in their response to the Committee's report, is about defence first and industry second. If we as a human race had managed during the past 3,000 or 4,000 years to come up with a better way of resolving our differences than getting into military conflict, the world would be a better place, but we have not done so. As a result of that, the defence industry exists.

The defence industry is not only crucial to Britain—it is an industry in which we are world leaders—but it is an industry in which, notwithstanding many of the reservations that have been expressed by the Committees, we have a very strong track record in terms of our commitment to an ethical policy. It is also vital to the interests of Britain on the world stage that, as many Members have reflected on, we try to strike the right balance between having serious concerns that any products that carry the stamp "Made in Britain" are sold responsibly and ethically, and supporting our vital defence industry.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the contribution that the defence industry makes.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I thank you too, Mr Leigh, for allowing me to speak. Would it be an idea for the British defence industry, which in many ways is our largest industry, to be switched from being a responsibility of the Ministry of Defence to being a responsibility of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills? Would that be an idea that might be worth thinking about anyway?

Toby Perkins: I have no doubt that it is an idea worth considering, but the relationship between the defence industry and our own military interests, in terms of the defence of this nation, are so intertwined that we can entirely understand that relationship too. It is because our defence industry and our defence interests—militarily—span so many different areas that we have the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which was formerly the Quadripartite Committee, looking at arms controls and recognising that it is a defence issue, a Foreign Office issue, an international development issue and an important business issue. That shows how important the issue of arms controls is.

Shortly, I will refer to the contributions that have been made in the debate by Members so far. Before that, however, I want to talk about the contribution that the defence industry makes. Total employment in the defence industry is about 314,000 people, with about half those people being employed directly and the other half employed in the supply chain. The defence industry accounts for about 10% of manufacturing jobs in the UK. A study by Oxford Economics found that the UK defence industry has a highly skilled work force, as my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has said, with 39% of the workers in the industry holding a NVQ level 4 qualification, which is a similar percentage to that in the UK's banking and finance sector. There are high-value manufacturing and engineering jobs in the industry that would be very difficult to replace if they were lost. According to the previous Government's 2009 value added scoreboard, the aerospace and defence sector added £12 billion in value to the economy. In addition, Oxford Economics also found that a £100 million investment in the industry generates an increase in gross output of £227 million and increases Exchequer revenues by £11.5 million. The defence industry is very important to us.

Alongside that, however, there is an issue that was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) and for Islington North. They suggested that, within the redevelopment and the rebalancing of our economy, it would be preferable if defence played a less significant part. The implication that I took from their comments was that they were suggesting not only that we should grow the rest of the economy while the defence industry stays the same, so that defence becomes less significant, but that we should try to reduce the amount that we are doing with regard to defence. Although I agree with many of the comments that have been made in the debate, I take issue with that particular suggestion. Given that there will be arms going out there into the world; given that we are a country that has a strong track record of taking issues of arms control seriously; and given the many steps that we are taking in terms of increasing transparency, it is absolutely right that we should want to ensure that weapons that are going out into the world are going out responsibly, rather than saying, "Let's shrink our industry and let someone else do that".

It is important to get that side of the scrutiny right, and the Select Committee plays a key part in that. In doing that, we take responsibility for what is out there in the world and for the way in which weapons are supplied, rather than simply allowing them to be supplied by nations that would not perhaps take the same care. That is the only point on which I take issue with what was said.

[HUGH BAYLEY *in the Chair*]

Katy Clark: I am listening with interest to my hon. Friend. Does he agree that we are lucky to live in a stable democracy when the majority of peoples in the world probably do not? We must take that major factor into account when thinking about how to develop our economy in that area, and the Committee's work is a step in that direction. Does he not believe that we need to think more about that issue?

Toby Perkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are having this debate for precisely that reason, and that is why the Committee's work is so important and why the previous Government introduced arms export controls and made a lot of progress. I would never say that we should take the view, "Someone's going to supply the weapons so it might as well be us"—we need strong, stringent controls. Having a Government whom we know are responsible and an industry that is scrutinised as strongly as possible is for the betterment of the world—and, by the way, has strong economic and commercial benefits. I will return later to some of the important conflicts that my hon. Friend mentioned.

In a statement, the leader of the Labour Party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), expressed some of the challenges, saying that

> "we should never reduce foreign policy to a narrow pursuit of commercial gain for Britain…we should also examine our arms sales to ensure that UK weaponry is not used for the repression of people"

in other countries. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran takes great succour, as do I, from that contribution, which recognises that foreign policy is about much more than simply promoting Britain's interests. Acknowledging that difficult balance, and notwithstanding the areas of agreement between the parties, the Prime Minister got it wrong when he travelled to the middle east with members of the arms industry at an incredibly delicate time for the future of the region. The visit struck entirely the wrong chord; our country got the balance wrong at that point in time.

In their contributions, many Members have recognised the difficult balance on both sides, and the fine line we tread. Generally, however, the strategic approach of both the previous and the current Government has been that arms must not be sold to nations that will use them for external aggression or internal repression, and that they should be used, as it says on the tin, for defence. The approach recognises that nations have the right to defend their sovereign lands but not, as we have seen, to oppress their people and use weaponry to stamp on legitimate demonstration.

Britain is a world leader in export controls, and the previous Government took many steps in that area, but that is not to say that there is not a lot more we can do. Before Labour came to power, we had last legislated on arms export controls in 1939. We had the consolidated criteria in 2000 and the Export Control Act in 2002, and since 2004 the quarterly report has brought much greater scrutiny to our arms exports. The success of that regime is highlighted in annex 1 of the Government's response to the report—Cm 8079—regarding the number of standard individual export licence revocations, particularly to Bahrain, Egypt and Libya in recent months but, as the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, to other countries as well. He talked about the increase in the number of revocations, an increase that is not entirely surprising given the recent Arab spring, and the sense of change in that part of the world quite unlike at any other time in recent history.

I recognise many of those steps forward, but doubts remain. I was struck by the many wise contributions of colleagues. The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling talked about the Government's suggestion that the defence industry's funding of the Export Control Organisation would be an improvement, and I share entirely his reservations about how the public would view that. Can the Minister explain whether that is being considered because the country wants to address its budget deficit, or because for some reason the Government think it would improve the body's independence? It sounds rather simplistically like, "He who pays the piper calls the tune," and I would be very concerned about how that was perceived. Will the Minister, either now or in his contribution, tell us the Government's thoughts on why that option would be better?

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling referred to the important matter, detailed in the report, of brass plate companies acting with relative impunity. There is a suggestion in the Foreign Secretary's statement that there will be easier ways to revoke licences, but there is little information about how that would be delivered, and I hope to hear more detail from the Minister. The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about the importance of pressing, in the European Union, for the amendment of article 4.2, and more broadly about the importance of the Government's work in getting international co-operation within the EU on the arms trade treaty. I am looking for a commitment from the Government that every necessary resource will be given to our negotiating team, to ensure that, given the Government's worthwhile intentions, we have done everything possible to secure a much stronger realisation among our international partners of the importance of the treaty, and that vested interests do not get in the way of delivering the detail that we need.

My hon. Friends the Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Islington North talked about the importance of the report and of this debate, and expressed their hope that the continued work of the Committee—work that does it great credit—is as strong as it has been in its first year. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran reflected on the conflict between commercial and ethical considerations, and on the delicate balance that exists. In simple terms, what is laid out strategically in the document, if properly enforced and enacted, should strike the correct balance. It makes it clear that the UK defence industry is important and contributes commercially and that we have high expectations for its administration and transparency, but that notwithstanding any commercial interests, if attempted trade conflicts with the criteria—if weapons will be used for internal repression or are likely to aggravate armed conflict—licences should either be revoked or not given. The policies before us contain the means to act; we must ensure, where failures have occurred, that those policies are pursued as they should be.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran reflected on the importance of ensuring that we keep the review in our minds after it has faded from the news and that our focus on it does not move on when the news agenda does. My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) spoke about security, assistance overseas and conflicts between that and other services and trade. He spoke particularly about the lack of transparency in counter-narcotics work. With his tremendous experience in foreign affairs, he will recognise that there is always a balance between transparency and security. None the less, he expressed the view that he wanted more transparency. He asked valid questions about the visits of the former Defence Secretary to Sri Lanka, and if he does not get answers today, I know that he will pursue them on another day.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington North focused on the particularly important issue of torture equipment. The Committee's work to hold the Government

[Toby Perkins]

to account on that issue is valuable. He also focused on the corruption of armies' aims under some regimes in other parts of the world.

The importance of US-UK defence trade co-operation was mentioned in the report, but not in the debate. We welcome it and recognise that its primary purpose is to improve the delivery of military capability and UK firms' access to US-sourced equipment and information, but it also has knock-on benefits.

Will the Minister reflect in his response on the performance of the Export Control Organisation? Does he believe that the complaints about its performance by the industry are valid? I have written to him with a parliamentary question asking how delayed the 36% of standard individual export licences are that are not processed within 20 days. I recognise that the report says that last year, the ECO missed its target, and that there have been improvements since then, but I am interested specifically in the percentage of SIELs that are not processed within 20 days. Are they a couple of days late, a couple of weeks late or much later than that? He will, as I say, shortly receive a written parliamentary question to that end, but if he can shed any light on the matter today, that would be wonderful.

Given the extent of the cuts to UK defence budgets and the tremendous pressure they are putting on the UK defence industry, it is vital that licence applications be processed in a timely fashion when our defence industry attempts to trade with trusted nations that present no large-scale concerns. The defence industry reports that contracts have been lost in cases where there were no worries about the licence application, but the process simply took longer than it should have. Business vital to this country's defence industry is being lost as a result of bureaucratic failure.

The Foreign Secretary's report has been some time in coming. The Committee's report was published in July and contains numerous questions to which we have awaited the Foreign Secretary's response. He said that he would return to it in his statement, but the brevity of the statement and its lack of detail are disappointing. I look forward to hearing the Minister expand on it.

On the new ability to suspend arms licences, on what grounds does the Minister think that is likely to happen? Will it be based purely on evidence, or will it take risk into account? If there have been no failures in the past but risk assessment procedures suggest that there will be problems in future, will arms licences be suspended on that basis? Will he expand on the revised risk assessment procedures, which will consider more factors? The Foreign Secretary's statement says that there will be greater ministerial oversight. How will that be triggered? Are any extra resources being provided for that? How will it be delivered within the improvements in end-use monitoring? What specifically are the improvements to transparency in reporting?

I agree with the Committee that the Government's move to bring the British consolidated criteria in line with the EU consolidated criteria appears too protracted. What is the time line on that? Do the Government accept the view of the Export Group for Aerospace and Defence on the ECO's performance? Finally, what resources will the UK negotiating team on the arms trade treaty have at its disposal to push for the strongest possible deal internationally? Can the Minister assuage the Committee's concern that the resource being given is insufficient to ensure that something sustainable, workable and powerful will be delivered?

We are grateful for the work done by the Committee, and we look forward to working positively and constructively with the Government on the issue. We recognise that there are good intentions across the House. If we feel that the fine line to which many colleagues have referred is being overstepped, or that this country's vital commercial interests are superseding equally vital, if not more vital, ethical interests, we will be quick to say so. We want to be certain that the stamp "Made in Britain" can go out around the world with pride, and that everything possible has been done to ensure that those products are being delivered to nations and organisations we can be proud to trade with.

4.18 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Mark Prisk): The hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was right to say that it is disappointing that only five Members have spoken, but my goodness, we have had some informed contributions, and it has been a constructive and wide debate. It has covered everything from licensing to the defence industry, Sri Lanka, the middle east, the Arab spring, the arms trade treaty, brass-plate companies and so on. I will come to all those points in my closing remarks if I can, and will try to respond to all the issues raised.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley). As his Committee colleague the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) said, he is assiduous and determined, and he keeps us on our toes. That is exactly as it should be. It does not necessarily make things easier from my point of view, but that is what the relationship between Parliament and the Government should be. Although I suspect that I might come to regret those remarks at different points, what my right hon. Friend does is nevertheless important.

These are crucial issues and there are real tensions—as has been highlighted in a number of contributions—about how we strike the right balance. Sometimes we will make a judgment with which members of the Committees are not comfortable, and on which they will seek to scrutinise us. I will come specifically to that in a moment, on the question of licences and revocations. Nevertheless, the debate needs to be purposeful. We seek to do our best to ensure that we are clear and open where we can be so, so that the Committees can do their job. That is an important point.

Let me turn to the key points raised, starting with the Arab spring. It is clear that those events—which raced in weeks and months from one end of the Mediterranean to the other and into the middle east—caught most, if not all, commentators by surprise. That series of events reinforced the need for a robust but transparent export licensing regime. This country has one of the most rigorous export control systems in the world, but that does not stop us from continually seeking improvements that can and should be made to the system.

I will come in a moment to the broader issue of the number and character of revocations raised by my right hon. Friend, and what that means about the judgments that Governments make. I will briefly turn to the statement made by the Foreign Secretary last week and then come to the wider issue about judgment and systems. On Thursday last week, the Foreign Secretary tabled a written ministerial statement, drawing on the evidence that we have been able to conclude from looking at the issue. That concluded there was no evidence of any misuse of controlled military goods, exported from the United Kingdom to the middle east or north African regions. However, we did identify areas that could be strengthened, in particular our ability to respond to rapidly changing situations.

There are three points to make in response to the contribution from the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). We propose, first, a new mechanism to suspend licensing to countries experiencing a sudden change in circumstances, for example, due to an outbreak of conflict or political instability; secondly, a revised risk categorisation, which will enhance our assessment against all the export control criteria and provide for enhanced ministerial oversight; and thirdly, to continue to work to improve public information on defence and security exports, including enhanced transparency of routine export licensing decisions.

Toby Perkins: As I said previously, I think for six months' work the statement is pretty light on detail. It refers to a mechanism to allow immediate licensing suspension. What is that mechanism? On each of the issues, we would agree with the general headline but we want to know what it actually means.

Mr Prisk: The first thing we had to do was analyse a live situation in a number of different countries, to ensure the analysis both in each country and across them was accurate. Given that even now—as we know in particular today—events are still happening in that part of the world, we need to ensure that we have that analysis right. With respect, that six-month period might appear longer than hon. Members might like, but as we are dealing with a live situation in a range of different countries, there will be common factors that we need to incorporate into the changes, but there will also be distinct issues in different countries. That is an important point to bear in mind.

We will shortly set out the implementation of the changes, so that we get the mechanisms right, and ensure that working across Government we will update the House on that in due course.

Sir John Stanley: Before the Minister leaves the issue of the revised risk categorisation, I want to put a key point to him. I understand that the Minister cannot speak for the revoked export licences that were granted by the previous Government. However, in the list of 158, there are quite a number granted by the current Government since they came into office. What is the degree of confidence among the Minister and his colleagues that, if the proposed revised risk categorisation had been in place before the Arab spring, none of those export licences, which were granted, would have been granted?

Mr Prisk: The intention is to ensure that no inappropriate grants are made. Can I be absolutely sure that a system we devise will preclude any decision made that in due course we look back on and decide to revoke? It is difficult to say I can absolutely guarantee that. The intention is to hone that risk assessment, that categorisation, so that it is more sensitive, and perhaps to understand the changed political dimension in those countries, and therefore the lessons we may see in other countries as well.

I am always wary of saying to the House, "Never again" or, "This will absolutely guarantee that what some people may categorise as misjudgments may be made in the future." The intention, to which we will rightly be held to account by the House, is to ensure that we limit the opportunity for that kind of miscalculation.

Bob Stewart: I have been in a country, Bosnia, where there was an arms embargo. Under the new conditions, would it be possible, in addition to revoking a licence, to re-implement it, at least in part? I refer specifically to the fact that I watched the Bosnian Muslim army beaten unmercifully and brutally, with no means of proper defence. Its means of proper defence were denied, due to an international arms embargo, of which we were part.

Mr Prisk: That highlights the dangers and the challenges around policy and military issues, and the difficulty—with particular regard to the nature of warfare today, which my hon. and gallant Friend understands better than I, having served in our armed forces—of getting the judgment absolutely right. I suspect he is pointing to an area where, on reflection, the west would rather not have seen the outcomes it has. However, I do understand.

Jeremy Corbyn: I commend the Minister for suspending the export licences to Bahrain earlier this year. The list of items suspended is very comprehensive. Most of the equipment suspended was anti-personnel or crowd-control equipment that is now being used by the Bahrain forces to deal with what they term dissident forces in the country. We have sold the same kind of equipment to most countries in the region. It is in all probability being used in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other places. Does the Minister not think that the sale of equipment to regimes that do not allow normal political dissent and freedom of speech and assembly should be thought through a bit more? Should we not use those criteria first, rather than wait for an eruption?

Mr Prisk: I understand the point, though it is not only authoritarian regimes that act in a way we sometimes find unacceptable, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out earlier. That is the point of the new criteria: to look at how we better judge those risks in future and try to learn from decisions made in the past. In a sense, it comes to the broader issue of revocations raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling. I am grateful that he accepted that there are a substantial number of revocations. That is important for us to do. Some might argue that that is an indication of a greater number of previous errors. That is a judgment for others, not for me to concur with.

Although I do not concur with the view expressed about the appropriateness or otherwise of the Foreign Secretary's statement, the point about the need for Government to think about both systems and judgments is perfectly reasonable. I suspect there will be times when we make judgments with which the Committee might not be comfortable. However, the need to have regard for both systems and judgments is understood, and I respect that point.

[Mr Prisk]

A number of hon. Members asked how licensing works. I welcome the remarks from different hon. Members that we have a strong defence industry, which is something to be welcomed, especially in difficult economic times. Although the defence industry in this country is sometimes controversial, it is vital to our manufacturing base. Defence exports help to maintain key engineering skills in the UK; indeed, some 300,000 people work in that sector, many of whom are skilled. I accept the matter raised by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) and understand the point the hon. Member for Islington North was making. I do not necessarily share his full view about turning swords into ploughshares, but he makes a perfectly reasonable and respectable point that should be put on the record.

The defence industry is important, as the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Chesterfield also clearly believes. We need to ensure that we support skilled individuals in that industry. If I may stray an inch beyond the demarcation of the debate, I should also say that spreading our engineering and manufacturing base is a crucial challenge to us, which I am happy to take up and on which we have been working hard. The volume of licensing activity has increased significantly, which is partly because legitimate defence exporters have been getting their job right. At the same time, as was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, the Export Control Organisation has made considerable improvements in its efficiency. However, we are in a very tough public expenditure climate and efficiency savings can, of course, only take us so far.

Several right hon. and hon. Members raised the issue of charging. Let me make this point. Charging is an idea that we have explored with exporters, but only as part of the wider question of how we best reform the service to ensure we deliver the best kind of service without diminishing the quality of the controls that have been debated in this Chamber. What I would say is if and when—and I emphasise "if" and "when"—that subject becomes a formal Government proposal with a timetable, we will launch a full public consultation. However, I accept the point raised by my right hon. Friend about the need to ensure the consultation reflects the independence of the Export Control Organisation. That is a perfectly legitimate point to make and were we to go down that road, we would obviously wish to include that matter in the consultation, so that we can be satisfied that we have got the balance right. Again, that was a useful point raised in the debate.

We, as a Government, do not feel there needs to be a conflict between effective export controls and supporting a strong defence sector. As has been discussed, regulations that are timely and effective are of key importance to both the competitiveness of the UK industry and strong export controls. Since last year, we have sought to improve both how the regulations work and the processes. For example, the export control order was amended three times last year. An amending order came into force in August 2010 which, among other changes, added anti-vehicle landmines to category B of the trade controls, which means that trade in those items by UK persons anywhere in the world is subject to control.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does that also include a universal jurisdiction application for any person who arrives in this country who has been trading in those illegal landmines? Would they be subject to the law of this country even though the offence had not been committed within UK jurisdiction?

Mr Prisk: The point is that putting those items into category B of the trade controls means that, wherever a person has traded in them, they are brought within category B and therefore within the controls that the hon. Gentleman has described.

The Committees' report welcomes the fact that the Government are exploring ways to exercise effective control of brass-plate companies. We are considering a range of options, and most hon. Members understand that the issue is complex and challenging. The problem is how to ensure that any measure we take tackles overseas trade effectively—in other words, activity outside our own jurisdiction. There is a debate around whether pre-licensing registration for category C and other types of trade should operate. Our concern is whether, in fact, that would deter the sort of illegal arms trader we are talking about, because, for them, the revocation of registration would, frankly, not affect their trade or, indeed, their behaviour. We understand and are considering that issue, which is thorny and has vexed the minds of many Ministers before me. We will come back to the Committees in due course on that matter. I want to ensure that if we introduce a proposal, it will work in practice, rather than just announcing something that does not work. That is the challenge, and we are trying to get it right. However, I accept the Committees' point on that.

I want to discuss one change to the export control order, because hon. Members have rightly raised the issue of lethal injection. On 30 November last year, as has been mentioned, we brought into force an order with regard to sodium thiopental in the United States. We took that action following reports that some states in the US were using it in the process of lethal injections. We then moved on to consider the other drugs that are used in lethal injections in some, although not many, US states. We consulted the industry, because the difficulty with some of those drugs is that they have a dual use that is perfectly legitimate and medicinal. Having done that, in April, we introduced a new order that imposed controls on potassium chloride, pancuronium bromide and sodium pentobarbital. In doing so, the Government are seeking to lead the way in introducing domestic controls in that area, and we are now pushing for action at an EU level. Those are important advances, because they demonstrate that the Government are willing to listen to concerns and respond where there is evidence to do so, applying controls that are proportionate to the risk in a way that does not unduly burden legitimate businesses.

I want to discuss two other points in that field: first, several hon. Members have mentioned expanded military end-use control; and, secondly, I want to address the question of torture end-use control. On expanded military end-use control, the Government have always made it clear that any changes should be adopted right across the EU not only to be fully effective, but in order not to disadvantage legitimate UK exporters. We expect to see a formal proposal by September 2012 and that the subsequent legislative process will continue into 2013. In the meantime, for the reasons that I have mentioned, we do not intend to take any action at a national level. That step forward from the Commission and the fact it has begun the preparation of the dual use regulation is encouraging. I hope that that is helpful to the Committees' deliberations.

I shall also update hon. Members on the progress made with regard to torture end-use control, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Islington North. This country has the most rigorous controls on equipment identified as being used in torture, which are known as category A goods. In April this year, as we reported back to the Committee, I wrote to Baroness Ashton asking her to introduce controls on the export of drugs used in execution by lethal injection. I also asked her to consider a torture end-use control. I can tell hon. Members that she has replied and has confirmed that this autumn the Commission will begin the process of amending the annexes to the torture regulation to control execution drugs. I understand that a meeting has been proposed for sometime in November. Baroness Ashton has also advised us that, once the process is complete, the Commission will examine the scope of the regulation and, at that point, I will make further representations on the end-use control. If there are any further developments on that, I would be happy to write to the Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, to bring him and other Committee members up to speed. Although there was an initial delay from my original pressing of the Commission in April, the fact that we have now got a response is an encouraging step forward.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the effective operation of the Export Control Organisation. We have been seeking to improve that organisation. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned the question of sales in that field and what that means for licensing numbers, as did the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Chesterfield. The number of applications received by ECO has increased from 12,729 standard individual export licence applications in 2008 to 16,477 last year. The truth is that that increase has meant that ECO has fallen slightly behind the target time for processing standard individual export licences, which is running at 64% being processed within 20 days—the target is 70%.

This year has been challenging. The events across north Africa and the middle east have created huge fluctuations in licence application flow and increased complexity in processing individual cases. It is still too early to know the full outcomes for the year, as we are only in October. However, it is expected that the performance we saw last year, just missing the 70% target, may well continue this year. I am monitoring and pursuing the matter, and I am aware that the staff have had to deal with a substantial change in events. Nevertheless, there is work to do.

While there has been some criticism from business, to which I am listening, there has also been some praise. For example, last year ECO won the "better regulation" category of the National Business Awards. The panel found that it was a great example of a public sector organisation applying the best commercial principles and systems to increase the service offering for its customers. The panel also said that ECO had demonstrated that it had substantially reduced the regulatory burden at every level without compromising national security. These have been a difficult couple of years for the staff, so I would like to put on record my thanks to them for having achieved this while having to deal with a reduction in resources.

On the operational issues that hon. Members have touched on, ECO has also responded to calls from former Committees in the field of operational questions. We amended the end-user undertaking for standard licences in July 2010 to make it clear that an export licence does not authorise re-export, and that the risk of unauthorised export is a factor in our licensing decisions. That is an important change. We have also taken positive steps to strengthen the service for legitimate exporting companies. For example, in June we launched two new advisory services, the control list classification advice service and the end-user advice service, as part of a more efficient way of dealing with things. Secondly, we continue to run what have proved to be successful training seminars. So far this year, 24 training courses have been delivered involving 627 delegates. We think that that will rise to 40 courses by the end of the year.

Hon. Members have raised the issue of enforcement. That is an important point, so let me touch on it briefly before I move on to some of the other topics, including the arms trade treaty. From August 2010 to September 2011, we sent 56 warning letters. We audited those letters three to six months later and found that in all cases the warning letter had led to a significant improvement in the exporter's administrative processes. That is important, because Governments are often good at issuing notices, but not necessarily as good at following them up. It is therefore encouraging to see that good progress.

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the UK Border Agency and the Crown Prosecution Service continue actively to enforce UK export controls, as well as the United Nations, EU and Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe sanctions. Between April 2009 and March 2010—when I have the most up-to-date figures I will bring them forward, but these are the best we have at the moment—HMRC and UKBA made 134 seizures of unlicensed strategic exports at the UK border. During the same period, HMRC and the CPS worked together to prosecute successfully five significant cases of export control violations, including the illegal supply of military and radiation detection equipment to Iran.

The Bribery Act 2010 came into force on 1 July 2011. I will come to the issue of bribery and corruption in the arms trade treaty in a moment, but it is worth pointing out that, as a Government coming into challenging economic times, we nevertheless chose to proceed with the implementation of the 2010 Act. That was not always welcomed across business and industry, but the Ministry of Justice has rightly put in place sensible guidance to strike a balance between our economic needs and ensuring that we tackle corruption, whether committed at home or abroad. Therefore, I hope hon. Members recognise that, in the operation of our export controls, we are making important changes and are looking to strengthen how we operate. On that note, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned the issue of depleted uranium and whether our policy has changed. I can confirm to her that it has not changed, and I hope that that is helpful.

[Mr Prisk]

Several right hon. and hon. Members raised the issue of the arms trade treaty. I was interested to learn—I was not aware, specifically—of the Committees' discussions with Ambassador Duncan. The diplomatic conference is due to take place in July 2012. The Government are working with key partners to use the remaining time that we have in the most effective way that we can. We want to ensure that we have the right level of resource. We have a cross-Whitehall team working on the treaty that includes not only my Department, but the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. We continue to use the ATT in both bilateral and multilateral discussions with other states. We are working with civil society and industry partners who share our goals. We have also been able to support a number of ATT-related projects, including research on implementation issues, capacity building in developing states and engagement with key states.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling raised the question whether the Government are committed to the inclusion of corruption in the ATT. The answer is absolutely, and that is very much part of the discussions to which I have just referred. The hon. Member for Ilford South was concerned whether there has been any change in policy on Sri Lanka. The answer is no. I hope that that is crystal clear.

In conclusion, the Government believe that a competitive defence industry and effective export control need not be incompatible. The Committees have, understandably, raised a number of important issues and we take them seriously. We have sought to be as open and thorough as we can, and we are committed to responding to these issues. The debate has been a welcome opportunity to update hon. Members on issues that they have been able to raise, and on others which are pertinent to the questions before us. On that note, I draw my remarks to a close.

4.47 pm

Sir John Stanley: In accordance with the usual conventions, I will make a brief winding-up speech. I am grateful to all the right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) for her support for the Committees' work. I endorse what she said about the need for the Government to continue to reply in sufficient detail to the Committees' requests for information, and about the importance of the international arms trade treaty. As she knows, in recent years we have concluded a number of successful international agreements relating to specific weapons. We have had the cluster munitions convention and the anti-personnel landmines agreement, but I believe that this will be the first ever time when the international community has been able to enter into—we hope next year—a treaty covering the arms trade as a whole. That is an immensely significant event. We look forward to the British Government playing a prominent and proactive role in that negotiation.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) for his kind personal comments. He made a significant point about the discrepancy between the degree of information we receive, as the Committees on Arms Export Controls, on arms exports, and, as he illustrated extremely well, the almost nil information that he gets when we are looking at how the Government support security issues, including counter-narcotics overseas. That was a valuable and interesting point. I listened carefully to what he said about Colombia and counter-narcotics, and he rightly pointed out the Foreign Secretary's written statement of 13 October, which said:

> "The Government have also considered how we can strengthen our decision making when we provide security and justice assistance overseas."—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2011; Vol. 533, c. 42WS.]

How far that particular area falls within the purview of our Committees, I am not sure, but I will certainly take advice, and the hon. Gentleman made an important point. I also listened with great interest to what he said about human rights and arms export policy towards Sri Lanka, on which he has been most diligent, as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. I am sure he will continue to pursue the matter.

I appreciated what the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said about the contribution made by the Committees on Arms Export Controls. If there is a single person to whom the credit should go, I would give it to the late Robin Cook, who was the first Foreign Secretary to take the initiative and to submit to Parliament an annual report on arms exports. That was a major step forward in transparency and accountability. Once the Foreign Secretary had decided to do that, the House had to react by creating a satisfactory Committee structure to respond to that annual Government report. I am pleased to put on the record the tremendous contribution made by the late Robin Cook. That is how the Committees on Arms Export Controls started.

I am grateful for the support the hon. Gentleman gave to the Committees' position on extraterritoriality, an issue to which I will return when I move on to the Minister's wind-up. However, for many years now the Committees have been ahead of Government on policy in that area. We were ahead of the previous Labour Government, whom we brought along considerably in our wake. We now appear to be ahead of the new Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government, who, equally, we hope to bring along in our wake. In the Committees' view, and most certainly in my view, the fundamental principle is that it is unacceptable for a British resident to be able to engage in arms transactions overseas that, if carried out in the UK, would be criminal offences. That is the position today; we do not consider that acceptable.

I welcome the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) to his first winding-up speech in his present position. I am glad that he shares my concern about the perception if the ECO is funded by the arms export industry. The issue is very important and we shall certainly be scrutinising it carefully when the Government's proposals come forward, if they do so.

I am grateful to the Minister for his opening remarks, confirming what the Foreign Secretary has also assured us in several letters sent to me and, therefore, to the Committees: the Government's policy is to be clear and open with the Committees, which is what we expect. I also welcome his response to my points about the critical value of judgments. I am glad that we agree that, when it comes to individual decisions on export licences, not only the system but the quality of the judgment is at issue. That is of the most profound importance.

The Minister referred to only two of the three areas on which we have so far not had a satisfactory reply—or even a reply—from the Government. He referred to brass-plate companies and to pre-licence registration of arms brokers, but not to extraterritoriality, so in conclusion I ask for what I consider essential: a ministerial written reply on those three areas of recommendation made in our original report, which we have not had to date. Please could we have that as soon as possible, and certainly before we start taking evidence again in a few weeks' time?

Finally, a number of issues were raised to which the Minister has not been able to reply, but we understand that the subject is huge, covering a number of other Departments. I hope he will take particular note of my specific questions about our key final recommendation, which is that the Government ought to have extended their review of arms exports to north Africa and the middle east into a review of arms exports to authoritarian regimes worldwide. We are still awaiting a reply, and I have put to him the specific questions to which we wish to have the answers.

I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate, which has been extremely helpful. We look forward to an ongoing constructive dialogue with the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

4.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.